Preaching the Red Stuff: J.B. McLachlan, Communism, and the Cape Breton Miners, 1922-1935

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BY THE TIME the Community Party of Canada (CPC) emerged in 1921 it was apparent to most labour activists that the Canadian "labour revolt" — which had impressed the Bolsheviks themselves — was over.[1] The disciplinary impact of a series of defeated strikes was reinforced by a recession that was to last well into the 1920s. For a "party of a new type," openly committed to political work inside the "reformist" trade union movement, the CPC's founding moment could hardly have been less auspicious. Declining working class confidence and combativeness were reflected in strike and trade-union membership figures. Between 1920 and 1924, the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) saw its affiliated membership fall by 30 per cent, from 173,000 to 122,000, while the number of workers on strike annually in non-coal mining industry (coal, as will be made clear, was a special case) plummeted from the 1919 peak of 139,000 to 48,000 in 1920, and then fell in each successive year, reaching 10,000 in 1925.[2] The lament of one Calgary railroader in 1921 that among his fellow workers, so recently in the van of militancy, there was "a sort of fatalism ... a chronic apathy for organization work" caught the mood of the moment.[3] It was a time, unionists of the "Old Guard" avowed, for taking cover, eschewing any form of action that might threaten "the disruption of the organization."[4] The CPC had scarcely announced its existence

[1]A.S. Lozovsky, *The International Council of Trade and Industrial Unions* (New York 1920), 26-7.

[2]Canada, Department of Labour, *Annual Report on Labour Organizations in Canada* (Ottawa 1921-1925).

[3]Organizer's report, *The Bulletin* (Winnipeg), August 1921. This was the journal of the railway repair-shop craftsmen. It was largely bankrolled by the International Association of Machinists (IAM), which took full control in 1924, renaming it the *Machinists' Bulletin*.

[4]Fred Hawse, "The Situation as I See It," *Carpenters' Monthly Bulletin*, November 1925; Joe Marks, speech quoted in Trades and Labour Congress, *Report of Proceedings of the 41st Annual Convention* (Ottawa 1925), 109-10.

John Manley, "Preaching the Red Stuff: J.B. McLachlan, Communism, and the Cape Breton Miners, 1922-1935," *Labour/Le Travail*, 30 (Fall 1992), 65-114.

when the TLC annual convention excoriated it as the One Big Union (OBU) in disguise and hence the root cause of the international unions' present — temporary — disability.[5] Loudly though party representatives protested that they were interested only in "renovating" the labour movement by building a "united front," right-wing leaders perceived more clearly than they the contradictions of this tactic and, for the most part, succeeded in dissuading their members from entanglements with the party.[6] One group of workers, however, stood boldly apart from this general trend. The coal miners of Cape Breton not only refused to submit to the changed balance of class forces, but in their prolonged struggle with the British Empire Steel Corporation (BESCO) through the early 1920s welcomed the CPC's assistance. The purpose of this essay is to assess the character of the party's work in Cape Breton between 1922 and 1935, a period encompassing several tactical shifts — as well as changing relations between party and class — and at once contribute to the emergence of a social history of Canadian communism.[7]

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THE PECULIAR INTENSITY of class conflict in Cape Breton's coal districts, David Frank has argued, grew out of the intersection of "two historical cycles": the coal miners' embrace of the heightened aspirations and class consciousness that swept the European and North American working class following the Bolshevik Revolution and the end of World War I; and the arrival of BESCO, a new and particularly aggressive industrial landlord eager to exploit coal holdings that formed the most profitable part of its operations but which were becoming increasingly vulnerable to extra-provincial competitive pressures. With virtually his first action as BESCO President Roy Wolvin unilaterally slashed by one-third pay rates provided in the miners' historic 1921 contract, claiming that this would enhance the competitive-

[5]Trades and Labour Congress, *Report of Proceedings of the 37th Annual Convention* (Winnipeg 1921), 21.

[6]The main contradiction of the united front tactic was that it contained an *explicit* commitment to eradicating the very "labour fakers" whose participation in united action it was intended to encourage. Canadian labourists were aware of this and had little incentive to cooperate in their own downfall; hence, in Canada at least, the united front policy was a non-starter. For an early definition of "unity from below," see "Appendix to the Theses on Comintern Tactics; Theses on the United Front," December 1921, in *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestoes of the First Four Congresses of the Third International* (London 1980), 406-7.

[7]This is the place to acknowledge an obvious debt to Cape Breton labour historians on whose work I have gratefully drawn, in particular David Frank and, more recently, Michael Earle. Oddly, given their subject matter, their presentation of the CPC in the mining districts is fragmentary. My intention here is to provide a fuller picture of party life until such time as Frank and Earle — and others — provide a complete one. I wish also to thank my anonymous *L/LT* readers for their comments on the original draft of this paper. Unfortunately, I have been unable to accommodate all their objections or conflicting political perspectives.

ness of BESCO's product in the key central Canadian marketplace and adding for good measure that the cut was justified by the falling prices brought about by Ottawa's 1920 deflation. Although the executive of United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) District 26 could detect virtue in Wolvin's market logic, the rank-and-file would have none of it. From the start of 1922 — before there was any appreciable party presence — they began using, apparently spontaneously, restriction of output tactics, described variously as "striking on the job," "ca'canny" and "the wee darg"; the last two terms signalling the Scottish origins of so many of the Cape Breton miners. Informed by federal Labour Minister James Murdock (a former trade union official) that restriction of output was "un-British, un-Canadian and cowardly," the most prominent of the Scots expatriates, district Secretary-Treasurer James Bryson McLachlan, an ardent supporter if not the local originator of the tactic, replied that he had experienced it as a member of the Lanarkshire Miners' Union as far back as the 1880s. This was an early indication of the local radicals' willingness to use their "Britishness" as a tactical and ideological resource against attempts to marginalize — literally alienate — their politics.[8] The suspension of the strike on the job in April did not imply any backtracking by the rank-and-file, but rather a move toward more open defiance. McLachlan was an early proponent of the call for a district strike, and this was duly endorsed by the district's momentous Truro convention in June. With mass rank-and-file approval (the membership rejected a succession of compromise settlements and clearly was running ahead of the district executive in terms of militancy) the strike began on 15 August.[9]

By this time the CPC had established a small base in Cape Breton. From the start of the year party representatives had been active throughout Nova Scotia and could claim several organizing coups. Both the Halifax branch of the Nova Scotia Labour Party (NSLP) and the NSLP itself voted to affiliate *en bloc* to the Workers' Party of Canada (WPC), the CPC's public manifestation, only to be turned down by party leaders Jack MacDonald and Tim Buck largely on the grounds that the WPC was more interested in building unity than in self-aggrandizement. Nevertheless, in Halifax a WPC branch was founded which included an impressive cadre of respected local activists, including Joe Wallace, then editor of Halifax's labour paper *The Citizen*, and two of the key leaders of the 1920 shipyards strike, George Borland and R.A. MacDonald.[10] In Cape Breton the pace of progress was even

[8]David Frank, "Class Conflict in the Coal Industry: Cape Breton 1922," in Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto 1974), 161-84. See also McLachlan's appropriation for the working class of Robert Burns' radical humanism, "It was 'Waefu'," *Nova Scotia Miner* (*NSM*), 4 February 1933.

[9]Frank, "Class Conflict."

[10]On communist organizing in Nova Scotia, see *The Citizen*, 12, 19, 26 May 1922; *Maritime Labor Herald* (*MLH*), 13 May 1922; Jack MacDonald, "Nova Scotia Labor Party Convention Takes Radical Step Forward," *The Worker*, 15 August 1922. See also Suzanne Morton, "Labourism and Economic Action: The Halifax Shipyards Strike of 1920," *Labour/Le*

more measured — slower, in fact, than some local radicals desired. Shortly before the coal strike, miners at one meeting asked Jack MacDonald why the party had so far failed to form any local branches. The CPC President replied that the party had taken a conscious decision to set aside party-building while the miners were preparing their "fight."[11] It would seem, however, that an unknown number of Glace Bay miners joined the party as individuals during the two-three months preceding the strike. J.B. McLachlan was certainly one who joined. It was at his invitation that Buck, the CPC Industrial Director, made a speaking tour of some of the union locals in District 26 in May and June, his visit culminating in a speech to the Truro convention. Buck's speech underlined the cautious approach to united-front work which he and MacDonald had adopted. It consisted solely in outlining the case for the united front and appealing to District 26 to endorse the policy. The *Sydney Record*, scarcely known for its tolerance of the left, declared it "such that not one in the labour movement could find fault with it."[12] Buck had resumed his seat confident that he had effectively carried out his task of building the broadest possible class unity but was then horrified to hear the convention pass a slate of ferociously leftist resolutions, issue a declaration that District 26 was "out for the complete overthrow of capitalism, peaceably if we may, forcibly if we must," and for good measure hurl defiance at UMWA International President John L. Lewis in (prescient) anticipation of his hostile response.[13]

As Buck gathered his thoughts his first concern was how he would explain himself to "the fellows in Toronto" for permitting this particularly disorderly outbreak of "infantile leftism." He need not have worried. The party weekly *The Worker* hailed the Truro meeting's "Great Stand Against Capitalism" and declared the decision to apply for immediate affiliation to the Comintern's trade union wing, the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), especially "inspirational."[14] The likeliest explanation for the clash of opinions between Buck and Maurice Spector, who edited *The Worker*, is that the CPC was not yet a democratic centralist, "monolithic" party whose cadres uniformly followed a rigid party line. On the important issue of the united front, Buck's interpretation stressed the value of a conciliatory approach to the trade union bureaucracy while Spector's — and McLachlan's — emphasized the party's right and duty to provide what politicized rank-and-file workers desired even if this meant offending the sensibilities of their

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Travail (*L/LT*), 22 (Fall 1988), 67-98. The author provides several useful snapshots of labour activists who joined the party, but in a brief account of the decline of Halifax labour in the 1920s omits any mention of CPC organizing activities.

[11]Report of meeting at New Waterford, *MLH*, 12 August 1922.

[12]*Sydney Record*, quoted in *The Worker*, 1 August 1922. See also William Beeching and Phyllis Clarke, eds., *Yours in the Struggle: Reminiscences of Tim Buck* (Toronto 1977), 114-8.

[13]Frank, "Class Struggle," 181.

[14]Beeching and Clarke, eds., *Yours in the Struggle*, 118; *The Worker*, 1 August 1922.

leaders. In period language this was the "united front from below."[15] The pursuit of the united front depended to a large extent on the views and personalities of whoever was putting it into practice. During the 1922 strike, Buck and MacDonald seem to have exerted a restraining influence, conscious not only of the need to respond to rank-and-file militancy but also to preserve the possibility of building labour unity and solidarity across the nation. The issue of RILU affiliation, Buck claimed to have sensed immediately, was always liable to isolate District 26.[16] Buck immediately tried to have McLachlan fudge the issue, suggesting that it might be politic to settle for an exchange of "fraternal greetings" rather than outright affiliation. McLachlan dismissed him out of hand.[17] Buck's caution, however, may have contributed to the conciliatory atmosphere in which the strike was conducted, notwithstanding the provocative presence of the federal militia, and the surprisingly sudden termination of the strike less than three weeks after it was called and with little sign of declining rank-and-file determination.[18] It might be wondered whether pressure was brought to bear on McLachlan for him to counsel acceptance of a final settlement that still involved a 19 per cent reduction of the 1921 rates and which tied the miners to a 16-month contract. This long contract may well have protected the miners from further wage cuts, as Ian Angus has suggested, but as recently as November 1921 McLachlan had expressed personal readiness to see the end of industrial legality in District 26, with the "pretty little baubles" of collective bargaining, union recognition, and the check-off exchanged for rank-and-file self-activity.[19] The prospect of a union in permanent crisis was not one that would have won much approval from the UMWA's international headquarters, whence John L. Lewis was pressing District 26 to get a contract signed, or from the CPC which was anxious to prove that it was not a party of "splitters" and "wreckers." McLachlan did advise acceptance of the offer as the best the union was likely to obtain at that time, but added that the struggle for full restoration of the 1921 rates was only in temporary abeyance. The miners duly voted 7,768 to 2,920 to return to work.

[15]For the CPC's varying conceptions of the united front, see Maurice Spector, "The Constituent Convention of the Workers' Party of Canada, February 1922," Robert Kenny Collection, University of Toronto, Box 1; "Resolution of Policy on Labor Unions," *The Worker*, 15 March 1922; "Fundamental Problems of the International Trade Union Movement," *The Worker*, 15 April 1922; Tim Buck, "Renovation of the Trade Union Movement," *The Worker*, 1 June 1922.

[16]Buck's impression was correct, but it is symptomatic of his evasive memoirs that he forgot the party's national role in promoting the RILU by rubbishing the social democratic International Federation of Trade Unions, to which the TLC was proud to be affiliated. See H.J. Halford's report on the 1920 IFTU Convention, *Report of Proceedings of the 37th Annual Convention.*

[17]Beeching and Clarke, eds., *Yours in the Struggle.*

[18]Frank, "Class Conflict," 179.

[19]J.B. McLachlan, "Nothing to Arbitrate," *MLH*, 12 November 1921.

It would be a mistake to award the party too much credit for the relatively satisfactory outcome of the 1922 strike.[20] The CPC did a creditable job of building solidarity and led the outcry against the dispatch of troops in aid of the civil power, but given that the party's capacity for practical intervention remained meagre, its main contribution had to lie in the quality of its political guidance. It seems likely that the party did exert some influence on McLachlan. But was moderation the best policy? David Frank's suggestion that "without ... militant pressure from below, exerted on both the coal operators and the union leaders, the issue of the miners' wages would likely have been settled sooner and with poorer results for the coal miners" properly identifies the key factor in the strike.[21] But what if rank-and-file militancy had been given free rein? Greater boldness might have achieved greater rewards, perhaps even full restoration of the cut. Given the perspective of the party representatives on the ground (and not forgetting the pressure for a settlement being exerted by John L. Lewis) it was always likelier that a compromise would be struck. It is incontrovertible, however, that whatever advice it gave, the party emerged from the strike with an enhanced reputation, well placed to extend its influence among the miners.

Perhaps the most important of the party's advances in 1922 was the recruitment of J.B. McLachlan. The Scot was not only the most prominent trade unionist to join the party in its formative years, but was also, in effect, the proprietor of a highly successful labour weekly, *The Maritime Labor Herald*, which he instantly transformed into the unofficial voice of the party in the Maritimes.[22] He was a proven industrial militant and an "organic intellectual" with, as one bourgeois contemporary put it, "plenty of hard, common logic beneath his communistic nonsense."[23] Despite being a difficult, often prickly man — albeit with a strongly Scottish sense of humour — McLachlan was revered by District 26's militants, many of whom he undoubtedly drew into the party. He himself was drawn to the CPC by its internationalism and its espousal of a strategy that emphasized above all the creation of a politicized, class-conscious trade union movement. Like many members of the new party, he saw the general strike as the highest expression of class struggle, but was also keen to build on the possibilities of electoral campaigns and independent working-class education. For the next 15 years, this "hundred per cent pure labour man" dominated party life in Cape Breton.[24]

[20]Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal 1981), 121, comes close to making this claim.

[21]Frank, "Class Struggle," 170, 179.

[22]Tim Buck, "Long Live the Revolutionary Press," *MLH*, 25 October 1924.

[23]Norman Reilly Raine, "Toilers Under the Sea," *Maclean's Magazine*, 38 (15 January 1925), 40.

[24]This description of McLachlan came from the memory of Emmerson Campbell, a younger contemporary on the local executive of the steelworkers' union in 1923. Campbell, however, prefaced this assessment by stating "They called him a communist. Called him a red. But he wasn't." See "The 1923 Strike in Steel and the Miners' Sympathy Strike," *Cape Breton's Magazine*, No. 22 (June 1979).

McLachlan was certainly a key player in the next phase of the party's campaign, the drive to organize the Sydney steelworks. If, during the 1922 events, the party's role had been one of restraint, the opposite was true in 1923 when CPC representatives sought to accelerate the class struggle beyond the objective limitations of the period.[25] Precisely why there was a shift to the left in Cape Breton at this time is unclear, but it may have had something to do with the party's knowledge that the Comintern held it in low esteem; knowledge that may have caused it to regret the failure to capitalize on the 1922 events.[26] It was surely more than coincidental that all three of the outside organizers despatched to Cape Breton in winter 1922-23 were on the CPC left. Tom Bell had a "penchant for drink ... and strong language" alloyed with a "passion for secrecy and intrigue." As well, he had already been arrested for revolutionary activities.[27] H.M. Bartholomew was a Winnipeg General Strike veteran and, as he proudly revealed to working-class audiences, he had the baton scars to prove it.[28] Malcolm Bruce, with whom McLachlan felt a particular kinship, "was, unlike Buck, more of a battler and for that very reason always stood well in with the miners."[29] Their presence helped ensure that the party did not "tail" the class in 1923.

The activities of McLachlan and the others during winter 1922-23 greatly exercised both BESCO and Provincial Premier E.H. Armstrong. BESCO's company police and informants kept the premier well abreast of red machinations. In one letter, Roy Wolvin's executive assistant, Francis W. Gray, registered the corporation's view that "it is not too much to state that a small, determined group of men has evidently selected the Sydney district as a suitable place to test their theories and originate action against public authority as now constituted." More than that, he added, throughout whole areas of Cape Breton there was growing support for "destruction of private property and the disregard of law and order." Gray reminded Armstrong that before his elevation to the premiership the latter had been Minister of Mines, in which capacity during the 1922 strike he had proposed creating a special provincial police force for the control of industrial

[25]It is hard not to see the 1923 intervention as "adventurist." One of the central figures in it later observed that in the 1920s "it was an accepted principle to wait for something 'dramatic' to happen, and then to 'exploit' it." Malcolm Bruce, "Tailism in the Work Among Unemployed," *The Worker*, 18 October 1930. There was nothing more "dramatic" for the party than its role in Cape Breton in 1923.

[26]"Minutes of Meeting of Colonial Commission of the Third International," Moscow, 3 December 1922, National Archives of Canada, W.L. Mackenzie King Papers, Vol. 63, file 419.

[27]William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada 1919-1929* (Toronto 1968), 33, 78; Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 42.

[28]Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia, Armstrong Papers, Vol. 666, F.W. Gray to E.H. Armstrong, 1 March 1923.

[29]J.B. McLachlan, "An Urgent Appeal," *NSM*, 22 August 1931.

conflict; Gray suggested that now was the time to put that proposal into practice.[30] Armstrong duly complied.

Gray's alarmist message was not entirely fanciful. On the surface, the party was engaged simply in backing up an attempt by the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers (AAISTW), an impeccably respectable international craft union, to gain union recognition at the steelworks. Yet underlying that objective there was another party agenda, one that sought at least the resumption of the miners' struggle for complete restoration of the 1921 wage rates, and beyond that the revitalization of class struggle across the Dominion.[31] Canadian revolutionaries were as unwilling as the leaders of the Comintern to believe that the halt to the revolutionary offensive which the Third Comintern World Congress acknowledged in 1921 was likely to be protracted. McLachlan, for one, believed that revolution remained on the immediate agenda. Who could tell where another strike, sufficiently prepared and pushed to its limits by a better-equipped and organized party, might lead? This is not to say that McLachlan saw the events of 1923 as the final conflict, but simply to suggest that he may have detected possibilities worth exploring.

The shift to the left did not preclude careful manoeuvering for the sake of unity. Although union leadership had passed into left-wing hands with the election of the "red executive" in August 1922, the new district president, "Red Dan" Livingstone, was not a party member, and the supplanted "moderates" retained a significant degree of authority.[32] Moreover, there was also the Lewis question. Lewis had warned District 26 to expect stringent disciplinary measures if it went ahead with its application to affiliate with the RILU, opening up the very real prospect of suspensions and splits in the organization at precisely the moment when unity was most vital. The district executive, McLachlan in particular, made a principle of the issue, one which (as McLachlan disingenuously and unconvincingly explained) did not involve any challenge to the existing labour movement, but was simply an extension of labour's time-honoured struggle for the "securer protection of the aims

[30]See note 8.

[31]My comments in note 25 are equally apposite here. I do not have a "smoking gun" document which categorically establishes my speculation: instructively, as part of its criticism of the handling of the steel strike, the Comintern mentioned the lack of internal tactical discussion in the CPC on all matters. My assessment is largely based on the behaviour of party cadres in Cape Breton, but also inferentially on the Comintern's contemporary sanctioning — even as its general united front line counselled defensive consolidation — of the 1923 German insurrection.

[32]Robert Baxter, for example, the deposed District President, returned to the mine and was soon elected president of his local. See Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia, Mines and Mining Papers, Vol. 41, Robert Baxter, *et al.*, to Sir Andrew Rae Duncan, 10 December 1925. C.B. Wade reported that Livingstone was closest politically to the IWW, "History of District 26, United Mine Workers of America, 1919-1941, unpublished manuscript (1950).

of the working class."[33] The executive submitted its application to the Second RILU Congress in December 1922 by way of CPC delegate Jack MacDonald, but it seems that he may have argued in favour of the anodyne alternative Buck had suggested earlier.[34] Pressure was brought to bear on McLachlan, and it was with great reluctance that he informed Lewis in February 1923 that the application had been dropped. "The onus for splitting this District," he insisted, "shall never rest on this Executive Board." THe RILU then managed to bring the affair to a typically obscure close by congratulating the stand of District 26 and extolling further struggle to win over the rank-and-file to a revolutionary perspective.[35]

Unity among the miners was essential to the success of the steel drive. Party organizers used the promise of solidarity from the steelworkers' "big brothers" as a boost to confidence among workers who in many instances had no experience of trade-union organization. Beyond the immediate objective of organizing the plant, McLachlan had long harboured a desire to create a single industrial union of all BESCO's workers — miners, steelworkers, transport workers, and shiphands. Such a structure, or even a looser alliance, would have the necessary power to protect the interests of all; without it, even the better-organized miners would see their superior wages and conditions subject to a levelling-down assault.[36] And beyond that economic objective there was the revolutionary potential of mass, class-conscious unionism. As McLachlan told the WPC Second Convention in Toronto in February 1923, the only kind of united front capitalists were likely to respect was one that involved a genuine challenge: such a challenge, he argued, could best be posed by monthly general strikes.[37]

The first step toward fulfilling McLachlan's aspirations was taken early in 1923 when the miners' and steelworkers' executives formed a joint coordinating committee and announced their intention to work for restoration of the 1921 rates and a range of reforms in the steelworks: union recognition, check-off, the eight-hour day and an across-the-board increase of 15 per cent.[38] Encouraged by this alliance, the AAISTW in late February called a four-day stoppage in the skilled departments where the bulk of its several hundred members (out of a total

[33]*MLH*, 25 November 1922.

[34]Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 61.

[35]Trevor Maguire, "Charge of Withdrawal from RILU is Bunk," *The Worker*, 1 January 1923; *MLH*, 21 April 1923; David Frank, "The Cape Breton Miners, 1917-1926," (PhD dissertation, Dalhousie University, 1979), 343; Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 122-3; Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 110-1.

[36]See McLachlan's letter to the 1911 Trades and Labour Congress Annual Convention, quoted in Charles Lipton, *The Trade Union Movement of Canada 1827-1959* (Toronto 1973), 150.

[37]National Archives of Canada (NAC), Toronto District Labour Council Minutes, Report of TDLC observer Richard Russell on "The Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention, Workers' Party of Canada, 22-24 February 1923."

[38]*Halifax Herald*, 10 February 1923; *MLH*, 17 February 1923.

workforce of 3,800) were clustered. They failed to win the reinstatement of a victimized unionist, but in defeat established the union's public presence. BESCO's exaggerated reaction to the strike raised the union's profile still further. The corporation orchestrated a press campaign against "Cape Breton Bolshevism" and Roy Wolvin himself addressed the Sydney Board of Trade on the subject, luridly outlining the desperate prospects for the industrial districts if revolutionaries gained any kind of foothold.[39]

It was symptomatic of labour's quiescence at this time that news of what was on the face of it a minor event should reach central Canada. Equally symptomatic was the response of the TLC. Its Executive Board evenhandedly rebuked BESCO's "tyrannical, un-British conditions" and the mischief-making of the communists, who lost "no opportunity to aggravate industrial disputes" and then used these to "secure recruits for their policy of class war and revolution." The TLC, however, apparently viewed BESCO as the less incorrigible, for it called on the corporation to join in "true cooperation" with "recognized trade unions" in the "battle against communism."[40] The TLC position can have done nothing to alter McLachlan's disdain for "labour fakers" — he was utterly contemptuous of TLC President Tom Moore — or his militant perception of the united front.[41] The use of red-baiting propaganda only stiffened his intransigence. Accused of "bolshevism," McLachlan took what was intended as a pejorative and turned it against his accusers. He and the youthful President of the AAISTW local, Paul McNeill, wrote a letter to Armstrong and Prime Minister Mackenzie King insisting that there was nothing "alien" about "Cape Breton Bolshevism." It was nothing more or less than the right handed down by "their British forefathers ... to the working class of Cape Breton employed in the Steel Works and the Coal Mines ... to walk off ... to the last man employed ... and to leave the Directors of the British Empire Steel Corporation to care for these plants as best they may." When they added that victimization of "the humblest bolshevic" would not be tolerated, they served notice that hostilities would soon be resumed.[42]

McLachlan's eagerness to locate bolshevism within a tradition of *British* struggle says something about his personal brand of socialism, informed and inspired as much by the Scottish anti-imperialism of William Wallace, the radical internationalism of Robert Burns, and the language of Chartist democracy ("peaceably if we may, forcibly if we must") as by Marx and Lenin. But it may also have been influenced by an awareness that the steelworkers had yet to be fully integrated into that tradition and hence were less immune to anticommunist

[39]Donald McGillivray, "Industrial Unrest in Cape Breton, 1919-1925," (MA thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1971), 94.

[40]"Nova Scotia Steel Strike," *Canadian Congress Journal*, 2 (March 1923), 99.

[41]*MLH*, 4 April 1925.

[42]Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia, Armstrong Papers, Vol. 666, J.B. McLachlan and Paul McNeill to Armstrong, 29 March 1923.

insinuations. Indeed, lacking even the unifying influence of a union like the UMWA, the steelworkers were riven by a host of sectional divisions, along lines of skill, ethnicity, race, region and religion. It is clear, for example, that relations between British and East European workers were strained; scabbing by the largely unskilled Slavs during the February strike was met with severe intimidation.[43] Religious rivalry, sometimes superimposed on hostility to "Newfoundlander sons of bitches," welled up in remarks like "We just can't trust those damn Mickeys" whenever denunciation of the left by parish priests led to defections from the union.[44]

Although the party was aware of these divisions and made some effort to overcome them (for example, by producing union materials in several languages), organizers too often rode roughshod over rank-and-file reservations. According to company police reports, anti-bolshevik propaganda was having a detrimental effect on recruitment and was a source of dissension among the steelworkers' local leadership. Foreman Waye, the local's full-time secretary, was not a CPC member; he was one of the ILP members elected on the Farmer-Labour ticket in the 1920 provincial election. Waye consistently advocated toning done "the red stuff," believing that quiet moral suasion was likely to prove the most effective method of gaining recognition. He specifically regretted the exuberant, party-led May Day demonstration in Glace Bay, where some 5000 miners and their families marched behind the "biggest red flag in Canada" emblazoned with the legend "Long Live Communism." After this event, the strongest indication yet of the growth of radical sympathies among the miners, some AAISTW members moved in the other direction and turned in their buttons.[45] Local officials like McNeill and Jack Macintyre, both of whom were probably party members, acknowledged that anticommunism was a strong influence among a large section of the Sydney workforce but sided with the party's aggressive posture. Malcolm Bruce seems to have been the most vehemently leftist. His standard response to those who spoke "in a reasonable vein" at union meetings was to label them "yellow curs" and insist that the steelworkers prepare themselves to meet force with force.[46]

[43]*Report of Commission to Inquire into the Industrial Unrest among the Steelworkers at Sydney, N.S.*, supplement to Canada, Department of Labour, *Labour Gazette*, 24 (February 1924), 11.

[44]Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia, Armstrong Papers, Vol. 670, Dominion Iron and Steel Company, special agents' reports, 10, 22 May 1923.

[45]*Ibid.*, A.D. Rolfe to E.W. MacDonald, 11 May 1923; Dominion Iron and Steel Company, special agent's report, 8 May 1923 (Vol. 666); special agent's report, 10 May 1923 (Vol. 670).

[46]*Ibid.* Bruce was indeed a sectarian "battler" and the picture drawn by BESCO's company spies was not unrecognizable. When he returned to Toronto after the steel strike (or more accurately, during it) he was for a brief period editor of *The Worker*. He then, however, seems to have attempted a return to his trade as a carpenter, but the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners refused to renew his union membership after he made an intemperate attack on Armistice Day. In the late 1920s he was assigned to work in Vancouver, where

Waye gained ammunition for his viewpoint when, during a second departmental strike in May, the steel plant manager hinted that he might be willing to negotiate with the union. Before this possibility could be explored, however, events took another turn that placed the initiative back with the left. Premier Armstrong had read the accounts of internal conflict in the steel union and concluded that the union would have to spend some time bringing together the "red and the non-red members so that, when the time comes, a unanimous stand" could be taken. Fully committed to BESCO, he had no intention of allowing the union such a breathing space. In mid-May he launched his new provincial police force, under Commissioner E.W. MacDonald, on a series of nocturnal raids on the homes of leading militants. He both expected and intended that these raids would turn up caches of incendiary literature which he would then be able to use to discredit the "reds" still further. In the event, thanks to the ineptitude of MacDonald's officers, who interpreted their brief so liberally that even AAISTW International Vice President Ernest Curtis, a well-respected official with "a lot of friends among the moderate class," was included, the raids added weight to the militants' case and promoted unity. Indignant steelworkers hurriedly organized a mass meeting, agreed to form "Councils of Action" to resist further attacks, and threatened an immediate 24-hour strike if there was even one more raid or arrest. Their response was effective; Armstrong ordered the reluctant MacDonald to suspend operations.[47]

Invigorated by this apparent surge of rank-and-file militancy, the party returned to the offensive, pressing hard for the steelworkers to call an all-out strike. On 21 May a union meeting voted for a strike ballot of the entire plant, but the meeting had been too poorly attended to be representative and the balloting was never carried out. An important contributory factor in the steelworkers' indecision was John L. Lewis's well-publicized opposition to sympathy action by the miners. In late March he had again threatened the district executive with sanctions if it broke the 1922 contract, and this warning, from BESCO's perspective, had the "very good effect" of making "the position of the steelworkers much less strong than had been anticipated."[48] On this occasion, however, the red executive was prepared for a showdown with Lewis if it proved necessary. District 26 was already involved in the dissident Progressive International Committee of the UMWA, a rank-and-file opposition movement backed by the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL), the

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the political atmosphere was amenable to his leftism. After his release from Kingston Penitentiary in 1934 he never really regained his former eminence, and late in the 1930s he began to move toward Trotskyism. Contemporaries remember him as a spellbinding orator. Author's interview with Reg Bullock, North Vancouver, 1978.

[47]Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia (PANS), Armstrong Papers, Vol. 670, E.W. MacDonald to Armstrong, 11, 16, 17, 18, 21 May 1923; Dominion Iron and Steel Company, special agent's reports, 12, 15 May 1923; *Sydney Post*, 16 May 1923; *Sydney Record*, 18 May 1923; *MLH*, 30 June 1923.

[48]PANS, Armstrong Papers, Vol. 670, MacDonald to Armstrong, 31 March 1923.

trade-union front organization of the Canadian and United States communist parties. Exactly a week after Cape Breton party member A.A. McKay chaired the PIC's inaugural conference in Pittsburgh, the district executive called a special mass meeting of miners and steelworkers in Glace Bay's Savoy Theatre with the obvious intent of pushing the two groups toward joint strike action.[49]

The 10 June meeting was dominated by keynote speeches from Livingstone and McLachlan. There were significant differences in the messages each gave. Livingstone emphasized the invidiousness of the workers' position. They stood "between the devil and the deep blue sea," sandwiched by an employer that intended to turn them into slaves and an international union president who undoubtedly would impose a new executive on District 26 if the miners took sympathy action. Livingstone declined to offer his own opinion of the decision the miners should make, but in dismissing "sanctity of contract" as a hypocrisy — BESCO, he claimed, routinely broke it every day — he seemed to support aggression. McLachlan displayed none of Livingstone's hesitancy. After endorsing Livingstone's observations on the contract issue, citing well-known grievances about rate-chiselling, he asserted that the real issue concerned the miners' "manhood." Quite simply, the miners had a duty "to provide for their wives and families." The best way to fulfil that duty was to strike "a sudden and decisive [blow] ... at the most tender, the most vital part of [BESCO's] property." The miners had to support the steelworkers, if only for the purely sectional reason that the latter's depressed wage rates were a "constant menace" to District 26's own hard-won standards. But a much larger issue was also at stake: nothing less than the ending of the wages system. Ultimately, McLachlan argued, the rights of capital would have to be confronted directly, and "whether this was called sedition or not" Cape Breton workers would have to seize control of the mines and steelworks or accept steadily-eroding conditions of life and work.[50] With unity, McLachlan concluded, the struggle would be won.

What this meeting indicated, more than anything else, was the general lack of readiness for united action. McLachlan's impatient call on the steelworkers to "stop talking and go into action for their demands" captured the mood of indecision no less well than his and Livingstone's insistence on the irrelevance of "sanctity of contract" underscored how relevant it was.[51] As a group, the district executive were less prepared than McLachlan to risk John L. Lewis's wrath, and in this they certainly reflected the views of a divided rank and file. The Savoy Theatre meeting ended with the vaguest of pledges to assist the steelworkers, and the District 26

[49]For a useful account of the UMWA "progressive" movement, see Alan Singer, "Communists and Coal Miners: Rank and File Organizing in the United Miner Workers of America During the 1920s," *Science and Society*, 55 (Summer 1991), 132-57. Although this article is mainly concerned with the movement in the USA, it includes several references to District 26.

[50]*MLH*, 16 June 1923; *The Worker*, 26 June 1923.

[51]*MLH*, 16 June 1923.

convention, meeting in New Glasgow the following week, made no firm commitment of support. Once again, the miners backed down in the face of John L. Lewis's threats. The Welshman had sent the convention yet another telegram, reminding the Nova Scotians that retribution would follow any sympathy action and adding that he expected the convention to endorse the International Executive Board's recent decision to ban from office "all individuals who profess to believe in [the] principles" of the RILU. The convention showed its mettle by backing the red executive and refusing to comply with Lewis's assault on district autonomy and "freedom of thought." On the question of solidarity action with the steelworkers, however, they were not yet willing to move from philosophical resistance to outright defiance.[52] And when the steelworkers finally did go into action, the miners' response was nothing like as spontaneous or as solid as McLachlan would have liked.

When the steelworkers walked out on 28 June, it quickly became apparent that their internal divisions had not been overcome. Although McLachlan wrote in the *Maritime Labor Herald* that the strike was solid, the reality was quite different; of 2,800 dayshift workers, around 1,000 initially remained at their posts, while the 1,000 strong nightshift scabbed throughout the strike. "So many stayed in," one striker remembered, that picket-line violence inevitably ensued.[53] Equally inevitably, given the record of labour conflict in the province and the war-footing on which the provincial administration had already placed itself, the state immediately moved to impose control. Within hours of the walk-out, provincial police were patrolling Sydney's streets, to be joined only two days later by 250 army regulars from Halifax, the first of several such detachments. At the start of the strike there was no immediate response from the mines. McLachlan announced — how officially it is unclear — that any "stunts" such as the use of Provincial Police against the strikers would provoke sympathy action. But it was not until 1 July, when the Provincial Police launched a savage and indiscriminate assault on a mixed crowd of strikers and churchgoers returning from Sunday evening services, that the first sympathy actions took place. Even then, McLachlan and other militants had to organize meetings to push the Glace Bay locals over the brink. After "Bloody Sunday," however, which McLachlan milked for the strongest effect, the sympathy strike rapidly became solid in Glace Bay, New Waterford, and Sydney Mines, and on behalf of the district executive McLachlan issued an appeal for all District 26 locals to follow suit.[54]

[52] *MLH*, 30 June 1923.

[53] *Report of Commission*, 15; Donald McGillivray, "Military Aid to the Civil Power: The Cape Breton Experience in the 1920s," *Acadiensis*, 3 (Spring 1974), 55-8; "The 1923 Strike in Steel." The latter is a particularly useful source, quoting extensively from contemporary documents and interviews with participants.

[54] *MLH*, 30 June, 7 July 1923.

At the same time as he issued this call, McLachlan sounded "An Appeal to the Workers of Canada," calling for a national general strike. Drawing on his arguments at the Savoy Theatre meeting, he stressed that the strike's immediate motive was simply the steelworkers' desire to achieve a tolerable level of decency for their families. But much more was at stake. Since 1919, McLachlan reminded his audience, the Canadian state had waged war on the working class at capital's behest. Regardless of its political colouration, whenever capitalist interests were challenged by striking workers the state placed its coercive forces at capital's disposal. The ongoing military intervention in Cape Breton was only the most recent example of state "strikebreaking," a phenomenon now so common that "the accusation of the communists that ... governments are nothing less than the executive committee of the capitalist class" had surely been justified. This being so, it was the duty of Canadian workers to form a "United Front" capable of forcing the immediate withdrawal of the military and demonstrating to the state that the working class was ready to meet any such provocation in the future with massive resistance. This meant a general strike. "One way and one way only," he informed Alberta UMWA leader William Sherman, "can the workers of Canada help ... strike every man from Vancouver to Sydney." For its part, District 26 was prepared to fight to the last ditch.[55]

Although the documentary evidence is unclear, it is difficult not to regard the party's role at this juncture as having been adventurist. There seems to have been little contact between Toronto and the cadres in Glace Bay, with the latter left very much in control of policy. They, however, seem to have taken their tactical cue solely from their optimistic reading of the balance of forces in Cape Breton. Nationally, the party had not prepared the ground for a general strike, and probably few of its leaders believed they were in a position to do so; in its 18 months of open life the party had just about established itself on a national basis, but neither its industrial foothold nor its influence among the trade union mainstream was great.[56] The general strike call had virtually no practical impact on organized labour and may well have been counter-productive, in so far as it provided trade union conservatives with a pretext for denying assistance to workers involved in "unconstitutional" action.[57] The miners' sympathy action thus looked more and more like a futile gesture, which helps explain why it petered out in its third week. By then

[55]*MLH*, 7 July 1923.

[56]At precisely this moment, the party was coming to terms with the fact that its first major propaganda campaign, on behalf of trade union "amalgamation," had flopped. See John Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class during the Great Depression: The Workers' Unity League, 1930-1936," (PhD dissertation, Dalhousie University, 1984), 15-21.

[57]Robert Hewitt, "The Nova Scotia Affair," *The Bulletin*, August 1923; "Labor Vindicates Itself," *Montreal Daily Star*, 17 September 1923. Hewitt's article, praising John L. Lewis's stand on the "sanctity of contract," was particularly significant, given that the author had been a "centrist" ally of the party at an early stage of its amalgamationist campaign.

the miners' worst fears had come to fruition. Lewis lived up to expectations. He immediately suspended district autonomy and imposed former district official Silby Barrett as trustee with full responsibility for the union.[58] This underlined the outlaw character of the strike, as did press hostility, injunctions against picketing and the arrest of Livingstone and McLachlan on "seditious libel" charges. Deprived of the miners' support, the steelworkers lasted barely another week, returning on 2 August.[59]

The strike had dire consequences for the steelworkers. BESCO unsurprisingly proved a less-than-magnanimous victor. Hundreds were blacklisted, many of whom were forced to leave the district; one tragic victim was Paul McNeill, who having moved to Gary, Indiana, was killed in a blast furnace explosion in 1924.[60] Those who stayed on were only rehired at BESCO's convenience, and even then suffered the further humiliation of employment at unskilled jobs in the dirtiest conditions. Trade unionism, weak though that had been, was completely driven out, replaced by a sham plant council that survived for 13 years.[61] The miners, meanwhile, also tasted defeat. Lewis suspended the entire red executive *sine die*, leaving local control in the hands of Silby Barrett who seems to have cooperated with BESCO in the blacklisting of an unknown number of militants, including some of those who were also forced to leave the province.[62]

Even so, the UMWA remained largely intact and unbowed. Barrett's authority was purely formal, whereas the moral authority of the victimized executive continued to grow. This was especially true of McLachlan, who after the charges against Livingstone were dropped, stood alone against the capitalist state in his sedition trial.[63] Although he failed to gain the official backing of the TLC before his

[58]Barrett had already spent several months working on Lewis's behalf, organizing the moderate element outside Glace Bay to resist sympathy action and ingratiating himself with the provincial government in the process. He did not convince Provincial Police Commissioner E.W. MacDonald, who believed that "Barrett is, primarily, an opportunist ... at heart he is as red as any of those now in power." PANS, Armstrong Papers, Vol. 670, MacDonald to Armstrong, 18 May 1923. See also "Trying to Find a Toehold," *MLH*, 9 December 1922. Barrett was certainly on the left; he was the first president of the short-lived Glace Bay branch of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in 1933, remaining a "friendly and loyal" supporter. See M. Earle and H. Gamberg, "The United Mine Workers and the Coming of the CCF to Cape Breton," in Michael Earle, ed., *Workers and the State in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Fredericton/Sydney, 1989), 90; David Lewis to Angus MacInnis, 21 December 1939, quoted in Gad Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics* (Toronto 1968), 68.

[59]"The 1923 Strike in Steel:; Paul MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers: Labor in Cape Breton* (Toronto 1977), 106-8.

[60]"The Late Paul McNeill," *MLH*, 21 June 1924; PANS, Armstrong Papers, Vol. 670, MacDonald to Armstrong, 13 August 1923.

[61]Bernie Galloway and Emmerson Campbell, reminiscences in "The 1923 Strike in Steel."

[62]H.M. Bartholomew, "Organizing in Alberta," *The Worker*, 29 August 1923, refers to exiled Cape Bretoners employed at the new Luscar mining camp.

[63]Wade, "History of District 26"; "Moore Does Some Toadying," *MLH*, 19 January 1924.

trial in November, the situation changed when against all expectations he was found guilty and sentenced to two years in Dorchester Penitentiary. Such was the consternation at the verdict that even the TLC was pulled into the united front which McLachlan's sentencing provoked. When Mackenzie King complied in February 1924, McLachlan was wholly unrepentant. He used his return journey to Cape Breton as a triumphal procession which was interspersed with mass meetings in the coal towns *en route* where he promoted the "red stuff" at every opportunity, and which culminated in a hero's welcome and civic reception in Glace Bay. His popularity reflected the continued high esteem in which the rank and file held the left. Later in the year, Lewis having lifted Barrett's trusteeship, the rank and file elected a new red executive with at least four communists in key positions: John W. MacDonald, President; A.A. [Sandy] McKay, Secretary-Treasurer; Joe Nearing, Vice-President, and John A. MacDonald, Glace Bay sub-district board representative.[64]

Support for the left showed how high rank-and-file morale remained. In pursuit of the 1921 wage rates, moreover, there was no alternative but to support the left. During 1924, however, the left demonstrated its capacity for organization during a period demanding consolidation rather than overt combat. After a flurry of small, unofficial strikes early in 1924, the party chose not to work toward resuming large-scale struggle, but instead threw in its lot with anti-Lewis dissidents in the United States in a bold attempt to unseat him and his conservative faction. Joe Nearing joined two other "relatively unknown" American "Progressives" to contest the international elections in December 1924. The left-wing slate won majorities in the two Canadian districts and took 32 per cent of the total international vote.[65] It was vital to this project that District 26 remain within the international union and not fall prey to the factionalism that ripened in the coalfields in 1923-24. The OBU sent two of its best organizers, Ben Legere and Bob Russell, into Cape Breton in 1924 to capitalize on anti-UMWA sentiment. McLachlan, for one, flirted with the idea of allying with the OBU to split the UMWA. But for Bob Russell's decision to respond with personal abuse to McLachlan's serious political questions, the Nova Scotian might have become "a deciple (sic), a probable follower or sympathiser."[66] To preempt such a development, the party invoked the authority of the Comintern; a number of international figures wrote to McLachlan to pull him into line with the united front policy. This impelled McLachlan to clarify his position publicly in the *Maritime Labor Herald.*

> In these last days of capitalism, it is the duty of all militant workers to stay with the great apathetic throng and bear with and fight for them and lead them along in the class struggle

[64]*MLH*, 15 March 1924; Frank, "The Cape Breton Miners," 408.
[65]Singer, "Communists and Coal Miners," 140-2.
[66]"'A Word With You' Bob Russell," *MLH*, 8 November 1924.

rather than get out and form a nice little sect where we have nothing but nice things to say about each other.[67]

With Nearing and McKay emerging from McLachlan's shadow, creating a more broadly-based collective leadership, and the new red executive carefully working to preserve the limited achievements of industrial legality, the left seemed well set to renew the struggle against BESCO and Lewis.[68]

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CPC POPULARITY PEAKED between the end of the 1923 strike and the start of the crucial 1925 coal strike. In this brief period Glace Bay came close to becoming a "Little Moscow." As Stuart Macintyre has argued with regard to some of Britain's "Little Moscows" (most of which were located in the coal fields of Fife, Durham, and the Rhondda), the precondition for their emergence was the ability of Marxist militants to win and retain sufficient rank-and-file support to wrest union control from political "moderates." Both in Canada and Britain this meant waging continuous struggle against the hostility of employers, press, the state, and not least, union headquarters — to which should also be added, in Cape Breton, the bulk of organized religion. Against such a line-up, and given the uneven and ambiguous character of class-consciousness, the militants' displacement of moderation was always provisional. The key to success lay in generalizing a minority version of working-class culture, articulating it to a more broadly shared "sense of public and private morality, of right and wrong." Invariably, however, militants remained "at once representatives of and strangers in their own society."[69] The renaming of the traditional working-class open-air meeting place behind the Glace Bay post office as "Red Square" and the large, militant Phalen local as "The Kremlin" captures this ambiguity: depending on perspective, these terms could denote either pride or disparagement.[70]

At its peak, the party in Glace Bay contained around 250 adult members.[71] Its immediate periphery, judged from May Day turnouts, was at least several times that number, while its ideological ambit extended to the 4,000 to 6,000 regular buyers of the *Maritime Labor Herald*.[72] As was the custom across the Dominion,

[67]"Shall We Have Another Split?" *MLH*, 23 August 1924. See also McLachlan's letter of resignation from the party.

[68]The case of A.A. (Sandy) McKay, like that of Silby Barrett, is worthy of detailed investigation. Why he broke with the party in 1925 remains a mystery; he was clearly a rising star in 1923-24. He, too, was a founding member of the CCF in Glace Bay.

[69]Stuart McIntyre, *Little Moscows: Communism and Industrial Militancy in Inter-War Britain* (Cambridge, 1980); MacIntyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917-1933* (London 1980), 36-46.

[70]Frank, "The Cape Breton Miners," 130.

[71]Frank, "The Cape Breton Miners," 338.

[72]Frank, "The Cape Breton Miners," 313-4.

party organization was by "language branch." At this time Glace Bay had at least two English-speaking branches, an Italian branch and a Ukrainian branch. In addition, though not formally affiliated, the Women's Labour Club of New Aberdeen (home of the Phalen local and a sort of "red neighbourhood") virtually operated as the party's women's section. Even after the national adoption of the principle of a "bolshevized" structure of workplace and trade union "cells" in 1925, the party made no attempt to change its ways in Glace Bay. Indeed, as McLachlan informed the Duncan Commission in late 1925, he and his comrades had not established even a local branch of the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL), the CPC's organ of united front activity with non-party trade unionists.[73] Party members operated in the pits as individual organic intellectuals, their interventions apparently more didactic than directly practical.[74] They may have been taking a lead here from what the Duncan *Report* claimed was broad apathy at the executive level of District 26 towards routine grievances: workers' control may have been more an abstract principle than a practice created from daily struggles.[75] The party's lack of interest in organizational implantation in the workplace may, however, have stemmed from its belief that it was winning the ideological battle so inexorably after 1922 that pit groups were unnecessary.[76]

Thus the party was essentially a propagandist organization (albeit one which also had demonstrated organizational and leadership qualities when required). This was revealed in the importance it accorded well-orchestrated mass meetings. It was CPC national policy to construct a calendar of revolutionary holidays, with key dates in February (Lenin Memorial Day), May, and November. Such celebrations were augmented by visits from leading party luminaries, often returning from visits to the Soviet Union. The following two examples were fairly typical. On 3 February 1924, the party held its inaugural Lenin Memorial Meeting at the Savoy Theatre. The "jammed" house was immediately treated to lusty choruses of "The Internationale" and "The Reg Flag," whereupon master of ceremonies Alfred Nash opened the serious side of proceedings by surveying the state of the class struggle in North America. Nash then introduced Sandy McKay and Tom Bell, who gave well-received speeches on various historical aspects of the Bolshevik Party and the life of Lenin, each receiving "cheers and applause." But the undoubted highlight of the

[73]Nova Scotia, Provincial Royal Commission on the Coal Mining Industry, Minutes of Evidence: J.B. McLachlan, 1077 (henceforth Duncan Commission).

[74]Duncan Commission: James Clarke, 234-8.

[75]*Report of Provincial Royal Commission on Coal Mining Industry in Nova Scotia* (Ottawa 1926), 8. The *Report*'s observations are at variance with David Frank, "Contested Terrain: Workers' Control in the Cape Breton Coal Mines in the 1920s," in Craig Heron and Robert Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Kingston/Montreal 1986), 102-23.

[76]"Is the Cape Breton Miner Turning Bolshevic?" *MLH*, 4 April 1925. McLachlan, reviewing recent local election results, believed that, on the whole, he was. His spelling of bolshevik seems to have been a personal quirk.

evening was a film of the Proceedings of the Second Comintern Congress of 1920. As Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, and the other revolutionary heroes appeared on the screen, audience enthusiasm became feverish, reaching a climax when the armed might of the Red Army and Navy was featured. When the excitement had died down, Nash reminded the audience of the sombre nature of the occasion and brought it to a suitable close by reading out the contents of a letter of condolence to be sent to Comintern President Zinoviev.[77] A similar interweaving of local, national, and international themes was evident on 7 September when another heavily-attended meeting, this time at the Alexandra Rink, welcomed the miners' favourite Malcolm Bruce back from the Fifth Comintern Congress. On this occasion McLachlan was in the chair. He set the tone of the evening with a speech concluding that the "Soviet road ... [was] the only one that leads to freedom." He then introduced the New Aberdeen Young Communist League (YCL) choir, which proceeded to delight its audience with a selection of revolutionary favorites. As ever, "The Internationale" was particularly well received. Alex S. Macintyre, another of the victimized red executive of 1923, spoke on recent developments in Canadian trade unionism, but it was the next speaker who really grabbed the audience's attention. Drawing from his recently published book of verse, "people's poet" Dawn Fraser "brought the house down" with a dramatic reading of "The Hairsbreadth Escape of Malcolm Bruce," an account of Bruce's role in the 1923 events. After such an introduction, the keynote speaker had to be on his mettle. He did not disappoint, treating the audience to a 90-minute speech on the Comintern Congress and the coming capitalist crisis. It was no surprise that his message endorsed McLachlan's opening remarks. The meeting ended with the YCL (or "Junior Red," in the local vernacular) choir leading a mass singing of "The Red Flag."[78]

Such meetings must have contributed significantly to party-building. They were clearly designed to promote a sense of the possibility of workers' power, hammering home the message that Cape Breton was not an isolated outpost of class struggle but an integral part of an unstoppable world process. The coupling of political analysis and mass singing — the didactic and the cathartic — promoted a sense of bolshevik intellectual superiority and a commitment to the collective that was as much emotional as reasoned. The pride taken in the performance of the YCL choir was that of an extended family, delighted to see its patrimony embraced by the succeeding generation. Similarly, one suspects, the enthusiasm shown for the Red Army and Navy had a familial aspect: if the miners were the steelworkers' "big brothers," the soldiers and sailors of the workers' fatherland were the biggest of the fraternity who might be relied upon in the not too distant future to settle

[77] *MLH*, 9 February 1924.
[78] *MLH*, 13 September 1924.

accounts with Canadian capital's military hirelings.[79] Above all, these meetings dramatized the role of the party as the embodiment of a tradition of struggle, the agenct of contemporary resistance, and the vehicle of working class deliverance. Any "red-blooded" militant, man or woman, was welcome to join this elect.

Glace Bay's "red culture" was constructed around a number of key institutions. The first a stranger to the area would have encountered was the party headquarters, located in a rented building immediately opposite the railway station. A *Maclean's* journalist, rather taken aback by its grimly proletarian ambience, described what was probably a fairly typical prospect in party halls across the country. At 30 feet by 20 feet the main hall — approached by unswept stairs — was fairly large. Its sparse furnishings were a pair of rough wooden benches and tables, at which a few "men of the miner type" were desultorily reading newspapers and smoking (the floor was littered with "pipe dottle, cigarette ends and matchsticks.") Only the walls, painted a dull red, offered any aesthetic relief. They were decorated with a single picture of Marx, three of Lenin and, most strikingly, "a large colored lithograph from an Italian magazine. This picture, called 'La Rivoluzione,' featured a long-haired, wild-eyed girl in scarlet, flanked by waving red flags, leading armed and frenzied workers along a road, against a lurid background of burning factories."[80] In short, the party hall was abrasive, rather exclusively masculine and no place for tourists.

Of the other components of the red culture, special mention must be made of the Workers' Educational Club (WEC) and the *Maritime Labor Herald*. McLachlan helped found the former in 1922, intending to develop it into a permanent workers' college along lines mapped out in Britain by John MacLean, the Plebs League, and the Central Labour College. The intrusion of the class struggle at a high level in the next three years meant that (to his lasting regret) this project was put on the back-burner. Nevertheless, the WEC managed to host a range of working-class educational initiatives, from one-off talks by speakers with widely-differing political perspectives to full courses on working-class history and economics. McLachlan believed that independent working-class education was a necessary corrective to the bourgeois ideology that permeated state education and to "the all too narrow outlook" that was so often the workers' "curse." Workers needed to learn that their "everyday struggle [was] bound up with the past and with the workers of every land who are struggling against the master class." He stirred up controversy by offering his revolutionary pedagogy to children. Asked by the Duncan Commission whether it was true that he taught children "Communism," he replied that that was "rather a big subject for a child." What he did teach was "something very elementary ... working class history ... how people lived, how they

[79]McLachlan admitted to a similar surge of pleasure when he witnessed a Red Army march-past during his visit to the USSR. See "When the Red Army Sings," *NSM*, 23 January 1932.

[80]Raine, "Toilers Under the Sea."

made their bread, were suppressed ... and jailed." He then offered the Commissioners his pedagogical credo:

> I believe in telling children the truth about the history of the world, that it does not consist in the history of Kings and Lords and Cabinets, but ... in the history of the mass of the workers, a thing that is not taught in the schools. I believe in telling children how to measure value, a thing that is not taught in any school.

For McLachlan, children did not have to wait for adulthood to begin learning what the Plebs League termed "intelligent class consciousness."[81]

The *Maritime Labor Herald* was an even more powerful medium of workers' education. McLachlan was the driving force behind its creation in 1921, as a cooperative in which the majority of shares had to be held by unions. Until it folded in 1926, however, it was to all intents a party paper, described on one occasion by Tim Buck as a Maritimes version of Lenin's "collective organizer." Its three editors — W.U. Cotton (1921-23), Tom Bell (1923-24), and McLachlan (1924-26) — were party members, as was Alex S. MacIntyre who worked on the paper after his blacklisting in 1923.[82] As BESCO's F.W. Gray perceptively observed, the paper's central motif was internationalism. "Uniformly provocative and seditious," he complained, "it persistently gathers together as part of one organized revolutionary movement every outbreak against constituted authority throughout the world."[83] Readers were exposed not only to coverage of local and national events, but also to reports on party life abroad, numerous vignettes of socialist construction in the USSR (some of them from the pen of Roscoe Fillmore, the celebrated Nova Scotia marxist who placed his horticultural expertise at the disposal of the USSR in 1923), and items of political analysis by leading Comintern figures. News of the tragically early death of John MacLean, for example, an event probably of significant interest to recent Scottish immigrants, reached the paper's readers within weeks in the form of a eulogy by the leading British communist spokesman Arthur MacManus. If Cape Breton workers remained susceptible to parochialism, it was not through any failure of journalistic effort.[84]

[81] *MLH*, 13 December 1924; Duncan Commission: J.B. McLachlan, 1100, 1134. At the 1935 Plenum of the CPC Central Committee, McLachlan remarked that he had been "largely responsible" for the failure to develop "young men" as effective propagandists. See "Work in Nova Scotia 'Representative from the Maritimes'," *Towards a Canadian People's Front*, Reports and Speeches at Ninth Plenum of the Central Committee, Communist Party of Canada (November 1935), 151.

[82] Frank, "The Cape Breton Miners," 313-4.

[83] PANS, Armstrong Papers, Vol. 666, F.W. Gray to E.H. Armstrong, 1 March 1923.

[84] Arthur MacManus, "A Tribute to John MacLean," *MLH*, 5 January 1924; Roscoe A. Fillmore, "Peas, Potatoes and the Proletariat in the Kuzbas," *MLH*, 29 September 1923; A. Lozovsky, "Is Unity Possible?" *MLH*, 20 December 1924.

In devoting most of its attention to industrial politics, the party remained aware that the class embraced other forces which could be won over to the fight. As mentioned, the New Aberdeen Women's Labour Club (LWC) had close ties to the party; its leading activist, Annie Whitfield, was a party member.[85] Although the club was officially the women's auxiliary of the Glace Bay ILP, the CPC offered club members greater opportunities to express themselves politically. Their role in the ILP was restricted largely to "social" activities — cake-baking and fund-raising — whereas the CPC encouraged much broader political participation, highlighting, for example, their contribution to J.B. McLachlan's Dominion election campaign in *The Worker*. Party members, including McLachlan and Joe Nearing, regularly contributed to their monthly political education sessions. While the LWC never became a mass organization, it seems to have succeeded in building class-consciousness among its members. By one account, the anticommunist backlash of the late 1920s was particularly sharp among miners' wives. Yet the Phalen local, whose members' wives formed the bulk of the WLC membership, remained a sanctuary for the left even in these years of reaction. In 1932 the WLC reconstituted itself as the women's auxiliary of the "red" breakaway miners' union, the Amalgamated Mine Workers (AMW) and again under the leadership of Annie Whitfield, strongly supported McLachlan's conception of class-struggle unionism.[86]

Some scanty evidence suggests that the party encouraged members to live out a counterculture. In a community as close-knit and religiously-inclined as Glace Bay, it was inconceivable to adopt the bohemian lifestyles favoured by certain national leaders of the CPC. Even the companionate marriages current among some of their Finnish comrades would have been too provocative for the community. One report of a "red wedding," however, suggests that the local sympathizers had a capacity for appropriate cultural adaptation. Whereas a Red Finn marriage consisted of a simple common law affirmation to an audience of comrades, the happy couple in Glace Bay were married traditionally in St. Anne's Roman Catholic church, but then held their reception "under the red flag" in the presence of "all the comrades." Some of the comrades may even have refused to enter St. Anne's: Joe Nearing was expelled from the party in the mid-1920s for refusing to

[85]Mrs. Whitfield, unusually, was more politically prominent than her husband James, a Phalen miner. In 1930 she participated in a Canadian Working Women's Delegation to the Soviet Union but was unable to subscribe to the official rosetinted view of the "Fairy Tale Land" (Beckie Buhay's description). See Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950* (Toronto 1989), 70.

[86]"New Aberdeen Women's Club," *MLH*, 31 May 1924; "How Women Worked for J.B. McLachlan," *The Worker*, 14, 28 November 1925; Annie Whitfield, letters to *The Worker*, 27 June 1925, 29 March 1930; *NSM*, 10 September 1932, 1 April 1933. On the role of miners' wives in the anticommunist backlash, see Provincial Archives of Ontario (PAO), Communist Party of Canada Papers, 5B 0085, William Sidney to Annie Buller, 25 June 1928.

hold his wedding elsewhere.[87] Married comrades were expected to raise their children according to class-conscious ethical standards, in opposition to the ideological sway of church, school, and secular leisure. McLachlan's "history from below" classes and the activities of YCL choral and drama groups supported this project. It seems likely, however, that for every Jamie Milley, a Phalen miner's son who at 13 was acclaimed as a model "working class fighter" in the *Maritime Labor Herald*, there were several more like the 16-year old daughter of another party couple who preferred the seductions of "love stories" (the inverted commas were her disappointed mother's) to those of politically-uplifting literature.[88]

Although the red culture was open to all, it was necessarily a step apart from the surrounding class culture. Male comrades clearly took pride in the knowledge that in a deeply masculine milieu they were not only the most far-sighted of thinkers but also the hardest, most intransigent of class fighters: they were real men. This comes across strongly in communist discourse, for example in McLachlan's frequent appeals to the miners' "manhood" and in his suggestion that the best way to do down an enemy — in this case BESCO — was to strike at "the most tender, vital part" of his body. McLachlan actually meant BESCO's profits, but the anatomical inference seems clear enough. Communists saw themselves as particularly "red-blooded," in complete contrast to the "creeping, crawling, bootlicking" advocates of class collaboration. McLachlan drew a direct parallel between class collaboration and emasculation when he suggested that one particular political intervention by TLC President Tom Moore had produced "about the same disappointing results as ... a eunuch into the affairs of a harem." When one "Former Red" anonymously recanted his radicalism in a letter to the *Glace Bay Gazette*, Joe Nearing responded by calling his manhood into question:

> There is nothing red about him! Not even his blood! If he were a red, or if his blood were red, he would not be too cowardly to sign his name to his letters. No, he tries, like a slavish sneak, to convey the impression that he was once a man. Sign your name, damn you, or shut up. And note that I am not afraid to sign mine.[89]

Canadian workers as a whole were unimpressed by communist hubris, and while there is no direct evidence for the feelings of noncommunist Cape Bretoners, it seems unlikely that they would have departed much from the general view.[90]

[87]"Married Under Red Flag," *MLH*, 31 May 1924; Frank, "The Cape Breton Miners," 101-2; Sangster, *Dreams of Equality*, 42.

[88]PAO, CPC Papers, 5B 009-10, Charlotte Dobson to Annie Buller, 27 January 1927; *MLH*, 5 July 1924.

[89]"Hot Stuff," *MLH*, 30 August 1924; editorial, *MLH*, 4 April 1925; Joe Nearing to the editor, *MLH*, 30 August 1924.

[90]For Labourist responses to Communist pretensions, see "Winnipeg Trades Council turns Down Workers' Party," *Labor Leader* (Toronto), 31 March 1922; John G. O'Donahue, "A Survey of Labour," *Canadian Congress Journal*, 2 (December 1923), 63; Robert Hewitt,

It would be a mistake, however, to exaggerate communist sectarianism. Coal miners were surely not so precious as to be unduly upset by violence of the tongue or other communist pretensions. An element of self-mockery, deflating communist distinctiveness, can be detected in one incident when the Phalen local was asked to sponsor a set of soccer shirts for a local miners' team. The union's agreement — provided that the shirts were red and emblazoned with the hammer and sickle — was probably given tongue-in-cheek. In any event, an aesthetic (and possibly political) compromise produced shirts of pink and grey.[91] More seriously, in the important realm of municipal politics the party was totally self-effacing, submerging itself in the ILP's struggle for electoral control of the coal towns. Some of the labour candidates may have been party members, but all ran under the ILP banner on slates that carefully cultivated working-class unity by balancing the representation of different sections of the class.[92] That the two most prominent labour mayors elected in the ILP's 1925 *annus mirabilis*, James Ling in New Waterford and Dan Willie Morrison in Glace Bay, were no more than fraternally linked to the CPC, made little difference to an alarmed local middle class which saw communist advance everywhere. McLachlan's interpretation of the 1925 successes was a mirror image of this position. Making no attempt to establish a critical distance from labourism, he argued that the Cape Breton proletariat was "turning bolshevic" such essential party doctrines as the terminal crisis of capitalism and the need to build a revolutionary party allied to the world movement were becoming part of working-class common sense.[93] His optimism was to prove misplaced. But at the time, with a communist-led union executive, growing working-class control of the local state, and every prospect of renewed class struggle in the mines, it was understandable.

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BY THE END OF 1924 it was obvious to everyone in the coalfields that a fresh confrontation with BESCO was looming. BESCO had already started to exploit a downturn in demand by chiselling on wage-rates, imposing protracted lay-offs and in some instances denying unemployed miners credit at company stores, all apparently in an attempt to soften up the rank-and-file before the expected district-wide wage cut. McLachlan told the visiting *Maclean's* journalist that "The company's going' for tae try another wage cut in the spring, but mark ye, bye —

"Amalgamation! How?" *The Bulletin*, March 1923; John W. Bruce, "Does the International Labour Movement Need Salvaging?" *Canadian Congress Journal*, 7 (July 1928), 24-9; "A Candid Friend Speaks," *Alberta Labor News*, 1 October 1927.

[91]Frank, "The Cape Breton Miners," 130.

[92]David Frank, "Company Town/Labour Town: Local Government in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1917-1926," *Social History/Histoire sociale*, 14 (May 1981), 177-96.

[93]McLachlan, "Is the Cape Breton Miner Turning Bolshevic?"

the miners of Cape Breton'll be flat on their backs afore they'll tak' it. Mind that!"[94] When BESCO announced a 10 per cent cut in March, few were surprised.

For present purposes, the importance of the devastating 1925 strike lies primarily in the role and fate of the party: the former was surprisingly marginal and the latter catastrophic. Developments inside the party in Cape Breton in the months leading up to the 1925 strike remain mysterious. It is clear, however, that a split emerged over the correct tactical approach to the impending conflict. In November 1924 the *Sydney Post* informed its readers that District 26 President John W. McLeod was not as red as he had been painted and would prove more statesmanlike in his dealing with the company than some of his predecessors.[95] Meanwhile, a sharp rift had developed between McLachlan and Sandy McKay. The younger man had not only replaced McLachlan as district secretary-treasurer, but had begun to challenge his local domination of the party. In 1924 McKay was chosen as District 26's representative to the RILU International Miners' Propaganda Committee — an appointment he could not possibly fulfil given Lewis's hostility but which McLachlan might have welcomed — and given the responsibility of watching over McLachlan's suspect relationship with the OBU.[96] By spring 1925, however, it was McKay whose adherence to the party line was in question.

It is important to note that the 1925 strike was very much a defensive action forced on District 26 by a company that was itself desperate. The miners remained combative, but their defiance was unaccompanied by the aggressive enthusiasm of 1922-23. McLachlan's observation that the miners would be "on their backs" before they would take the wage-cut acknowledged that total defeat was a real possibility. And if he could envisage such a prospect, it was understandable that others of a milder disposition might enter such a contest reluctantly and with an eye to compromise. When the strike began in March, the CPC leadership fully supported McLachlan's view that District 26 should go on the offensive. He editorialized that since the miners were engaged in a "conflict," a "battle," a "war" requiring "ever-lasting attack," they could not afford to be diverted by voices counselling moderation. As in 1922-23, the strike had to be "100 per cent," conducted actively and militantly with solid mass pickets and regular mass meetings, and it had to be spread throughout Canada.[97] McLachlan may have believed that only a rapid offensive would preserve the union itself, but within weeks of the walk-out, having seen the district executive adopt precisely the moderate policy he felt would be disastrous, he came to the conclusion that the union was not worth saving. During April he joined Jack MacDonald in appeals to the rank-and-file of District 26 to take control of the strike, the red executive having "failed completely

[94]Raine, "Toilers Under the Sea."

[95]MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, 128.

[96]McLachlan was mortified by McKay's role as a middle-man between Cape Breton, Toronto and the Comintern. See his letter of resignation.

[97]"Don't Let Tom Moore Take the Fight Out of Your Union," *MLH*, 4 April 1925. "Making Demands and the United Front," *The Left Wing*, May 1925.

and repudiated everything we stood for." By the end of May he was prepared to "allow BESCO to drive the Lewis machine out," although he remained deeply concerned about the danger of landing "the whole movement in a bitter split."[98] Although it is unclear why the CPC was ready for a partial abandonment of the united front — it seems to have been Tim Buck who first raised the prospect of ditching the UMWA — contributing factors included the collapse of the anti-Lewis movement in the United States, the emergence of a significant breakaway movement in Alberta, and the CPC's own campaign for "Canadian Trade Union Autonomy."[99] In the event, the party's efforts to promote a rank-and-file dual leadership foundered on "that sense of loyalty that one finds in the rank and file to 'their elected officers'," while its quiet attempt to raise the issue of a split probably proved harmful to its interests.[100]

McLachlan described the tactical approach of the district executive as "nothing but begging and being respectable."[101] By "begging" he was referring to the executive's appeal for any form of material assistance from any quarter; by "being respectable" he meant the political concessions it was thereby forced to make. From early in the strike the executive delegated resource-gathering responsibility to the Citizens' Relief Committees which sprang up in the coal towns. These committees drew in both Protestant and Roman Catholic churches as well as representatives of the mainly petit-bourgeois business community. This development might be interpreted as a successful manifestation of the united front, but this was not how McLachlan or the party leadership saw it. In their view, class politics had been sacrificed for a spurious community response that dampened the "fighting class spirit of the miners."[102] Certainly, the relief committees' national appeals emphasized the humanitarian aspects of the strike: as each of its five months passed, it became easier to present the harrowing conditions of miners' wives and children as a national scandal.[103] But in calling upon Canadians, in effect, to ignore the politics of the strike and think only of the material needs of mining communities, the relief committees practiced a double standard: the Roman Catholic church threatened to boycott the relief effort if the union executive accepted a $5,000 donation from the RILU. Forced to choose between the two organizations, the union

[98]PAO, CPC Papers, 1A 0014-19, J.B. McLachlan to Tim Buck, 4 May 1925; McLachlan to Buck, 26 May 1925.

[99]Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 22-6; Allen Seager, "A History of the Mine Workers' Union of Canada, 1925-1036," (MA thesis, McGill University, 1977), chs. 1, 2.

[100]PAO, CPC Papers, McLachlan to Buck, 4 May 1925.

[101]*Ibid.*

[102]Maurice Spector, "The Class Struggle in Canada, 1925," *The Worker*, 9 January 1926; Frank, "Company Town/Labour Town," takes the more positive view.

[103]E. Crone, "Twelve Thousand on Rations," *Canadian Congress Journal*, 4 (April 1925), 13-4, reprinted in Irving Abella and David Millar, eds., *The Canadian Worker in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto 1978), 135-8.

succumbed to blackmail, leaving the party bemoaning its "spineless ... suicidal" conduct and McLachlan personally to distribute the RILU money.[104]

And yet the committees' effort was impressive. The Red Cross, TLC, and more surprisingly the Great War Veterans' Association, the Quaker Oats Company, and the Canadian National Railway all made significant contributions; and even Lewis was shamed into belatedly issuing $10,000 a week — about 75 cents a striker.[105] These contributions were all that stood between many mining families and starvation. On the other hand, they were only necessary because the strike lasted so long. McLachlan believed that if his tactics had been employed from the outset, relief gathering, with its attendant political compromises, would have been a less dominant factor. Moreover, as the strike dragged on, BESCO was encouraged to heap on further demands that "amounted to an attempt to break the union": no overtime rates, abolition of the check-off, and the right to operate a blacklist.[106] Against the background of this provocation McLachlan's argument gained resonance, and in June rank-and-file pressure forced the executive to call a 100 per cent strike. The instituting of more militant picketing led inexorably to clashes between strikers and BESCO's brutal company police, culminating in the struggle for control of the Waterford Lake power plant which saw one striker shot to death, his comrades hunting down and battering BESCO policemen, and the Canadian Army once again on its way to Cape Breton.[107] It was in this context that newly-elected Tory Premier E.N. Rhodes magically produced a compromise settlement: BESCO marginally reduced the size of its wage-cut and both sides accepted the intervention of a Royal Commission to investigate not only the rights and wrongs of the wages issue but the entire workings of the provincial coal industry. McLachlan could well argue that militancy had saved the union.

What, then, of the party? Its stand had been principled and, by its lights, politically correct. Holding to the united front line, it called on the TLC to organize a national and international solidarity effort. When the "Parliament of Labour" declined the offer (declining also the party's demand for an emergency Congress convention on the strike), the party launched its own National Miners' Relief Committee and mobilized an impressive campaign of relief-gathering and propaganda on behalf of nationalization of the mines and a ban on the use of military force during strikes. Numerous union locals and district labour councils endorsed these demands and passed them on as resolutions to the 1925 TLC Annual Convention at Ottawa in September. The party's appeal for sympathy action during the strike, however, was once again ineffective. Canadian workers, Maurice Spector lamented in an end-of-year survey of the class struggle, remained more

[104]"Making Demands and the United Front"; Spector, "The Class Struggle in Canada, 1925."
[105]Stuart Marshall Jamieson, *Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada, 1900-1966* (Ottawa 1968), 202.
[106]*Ibid.*
[107]MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, 141-6; Frank, "Contested Terrain," 113-4.

impressed by the "siren song" of the tariff than appeals to class solidarity.[108] When the TLC Convention contrived to pass an emasculated version of the party's nationalization resolution (which it then proceeded to ignore), the writing was on the wall for the united front; the party delegation left Ottawa wondering whether it was worth going through another "annual humiliation and betrayal."[109]

In Cape Breton, the two-year period following the strike saw the CPC all but disappear as an organized force. In part, this was because the exhausted miners were no longer prepared to be class struggle's shock troops. After a brief renewal of looting at BESCO company stores in January 1926, itself an indication of their desperation, the miners paused to digest the recommendations of the Duncan Commission. They had to swallow the original wage-cut and, in so far as their relative quiescence in 1926-27 indicated, something of the class-peace message of the Duncan Report. This promoted a corporatist solution to the regional industry's endemic problems of industrial relations. It called for BESCO to recognize the UMWA unequivocally as the miners' legitimate collective voice and for District 26 to bring its practices into line with the bureaucratic model of the international union. Specifically, the report sought a shift from rank-and-file to centralized district control, ending the structuring of union life around the ritualized negotiation of the annual contract and extending the period of office of the district executive to at least two years. Freed of the need to offer themselves for annual endorsement, the district executive would gain the prestige necessary to uphold the miners' collective interests during negotiations. Longer contractual periods, moreover, would allow greater attention to be given to the resolution of daily workplace grievances. The *Report* concluded its promotion of industrial legality and bureaucratic "business" unionism by granting a key mediating role to the provincial state: on receipt of guaranteed "union-management" cooperation for the maintenance of "continuous and uninterrupted" coal production, to which end the elimination of "internal factions" and "political aims" was a *sine qua non*, the provincial government would lobby the Dominion Fuel Board for the construction of coking plants that would render Nova Scotian coal fully suitable for use in Ontario industry.[110]

Although the Duncan *Report* had little practical impact on the organization or the class relations of the industry, it probably fed into the mood of retrenchment that was spreading among the rank-and-file. The latter kept their annual union elections, but re-elected John W. McLeod in 1926 and 1927. Since McLeod, with McKay, had been expelled from the party by the end of the strike, it might be concluded that his continued popularity was tantamount to an endorsement of moderate leadership. This helps explain also the party's rapid decline. McLachlan's personal standing remained high, but his political influence inevitably diminished

[108]University of Toronto, Robert Kenny Collection, Box 2, Tim Buck, "Report of Industrial Department," 7-8, Communist Party of Canada, Fifth National Convention, September 1925.
[109]*The Worker*, 12 September 1925.
[110]Duncan Commission *Report*, 10, 28-9.

after the *Maritime Labor Herald* offices and plant were mysteriously burned down during the strike. Although he managed somehow to resurrect the paper in 1926, some UMWA locals used the hiatus to end their financial support and it failed to survive in 1927.[111] Recession, victimization, and the decision of the UMWA International Executive Board early in 1926 to ban communists from membership all took their toll on party numbers. An early indication of this was the pitifully small turnout on May Day 1926.[112] The District Executive did not operate John L. Lewis's ban on communists, but it left them in no doubt that they would not be defended if the company did so. Hence, during 1928 the last party member to continue selling *The Worker* at his pit was forced to toe the line.[113] By the spring of 1928 party membership was in single figures, unable even to prevent the humiliation of eviction from its headquarters for non-payment of rent.[114] In April 1928 District 26 voted overwhelmingly against party advice to accept the terms of its first contract with BESCO's successor, Dominion Steel and Coal Company (DOSCO), a decision the *Sydney Post* hailed as heralding a new era of "healthy industrial relations" in the province. The day of "the radical element, now thoroughly discredited in all the collieries" was over.[115]

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ON THE FACE OF IT, this was not the most opportune time to launch a fresh initiative against John L. Lewis's brand of collaborationist unionism, now apparently consolidating in Nova Scotia. Objectivity, however, was not characteristic of party tactics as it entered the so-called "third period" of postwar capitalist development and, largely at Comintern behest, launched the "new line" of "class against class." The new policy, however, which demanded that communist parties carve out greater political and trade union independence from erstwhile socialist and labour reformist allies, who were now to be designated as "social fascists," in preparation for a new wave of economic crises and revolutionary upheavals, did not lack domestic roots, in Canada at least. The CPC's disaffection from the united front policy as early as 1925 has already been noted. The TLC's persistent refusal to respond to any party initiatives or offers to cooperate in rebuilding trade union strength culminated in its betrayal (as the party saw it) of the 1925 coal strike. That

[111]Duncan Commission: Clarence Kearney, 362-68; "The UMW Elections," editorial, *Sydney Post*, 18 August 1927.
[112]*MLH*, 8 May 1926.
[113]PAO, CPC Papers, 5B 0088-90, Harry Campbell to Annie Buller, 20 August 1928.
[114]For the steady decline of the party in Glace Bay, see *Ibid.*, Campbell to Buller, 23 January 1927 (5B 0002); R. McDougall to Buller, 7 November 1927 (5B 0049-50); Campbell to Buller, 19 March 1928 (5B 0064-69); Jim and Annie Whitfield to Buller, 30 January 1929 (5B 0096); Murdoch Clarke to Tim Buck, 19 June 1929 (1A 0051).
[115]*Sydney Post*, 20 April 1928.

year, moreover, saw the first examples of reformist labour organizations purging themselves of party members; while this process never attained the level reached in the United States' labour movement, it indicated that prosecuting the united front was unlikely to become any easier for the party.[116] Thus the period between 1925 and 1928 was transitional, with the party edging towards greater independence, sometimes in collaboration with the "dual," "nationalist" trade union centre, the All-Canadian Congress of Labour (ACCL), formed in 1927, but reluctant to separate decisively from the TLC or international unionism. The "new line," first outlined in any real detail at the Fourth RILU Congress in March 1928, broke the impasse by clearly telling Canadian Communists that the main thrust of their industrial energies should be devoted increasingly to the formation of "red unions."[117] Cape Breton hosted the first such initiative.

One of the problems for party strategists in dealing with the Cape Breton situation in the late 1920s (apart, of course, from the prevailing mood of defensiveness) was the clash between their desire to promote Canadian Trade Union Autonomy and their international obligations to the CPUSA. The party was tempted to press for a complete split from the UMWA, with District 26 reconstituting itself as the eastern wing of the Mine Workers' Union of Canada (MWUC), which had emerged from a split in District 18.[118] On the other hand, 1926 also saw the revival of the "progressive" anti-Lewis forces in the United States, in the shape of the "Save-the-Union Movement," an unusually impressive alliance of communist and other radical forces. Notwithstanding the decline of the left in District 26, Cape Breton's support remained crucial to the new movement's prospects for displacing Lewis. American Communist trade union leader William Z. Foster was generally hostile to the nationalistic trend in CPC policy and he almost certainly pressured the Canadians to stay with the UMWA.[119] The party never succeeded in resolving this dilemma, and in the event failed to give any clear guidance in Cape Breton. McLachlan publicly agonized over the question of a split, now suggesting the left was against splits in principle, now suggesting that the question was purely tactical. His last publicly stated position was that the UMWA would have to be replaced but not until it was certain that the split would be clean and definitive.[120]

The party's position remained confused when it launched the "new line" in Cape Breton in April 1928. Initially, Joe Gilbert arrived from Toronto as organizer of the Progressive Miners' Committee (PMC), an offshoot of the Save-the-Union

[116]Canada, Department of Labour, *Annual Report on Labour Organizations in Canada 1925* (Ottawa 1926), 162-4; "Canadian Labour and Communists," *The Times* (London), 30 November 1925.

[117]"Montreal Gets Report on RILU Congress," *The Worker*, 14 July 1928.

[118]PAO, CPC Papers, 1A 0029-31, John Stokaluk to Tim Buck, 22 September 1925; "Are We Back to 1909?" editorial, *MLH*, 29 May 1926.

[119]Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 113-5; *The Worker*, 26 March 1927; Singer, "Communists and Coal Miners," 143-7.

[120]*MLH*, 20 March, 17 April, 29 May 1926.

movement, and raised anew the banner of rank-and-file unionism within the UMWA. On this basis he recruited a cadre of anti-Lewis dissidents, including a number of local officials. Evidently, radicalism had not been eradicated in Cape Breton. Indeed, the previous year had seen McLachlan inspire a one-day strike by virtually the entire Glace Bay sub-district in sympathy with the international campaign against the execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. This strike had taken place against the opposition and threats of the district executive, and may have represented a rank-and-file warning that their loyalty was contingent on the executive's doing a better job, for example with regard to the contentious introduction of longwall mining.[121] At a time when party organizers needed little encouragement to see revolutionary possibilities in every hopeful sign, the Sacco-Vanzetti walk-out and the persistence of quiet discontent were enough to convince Gilbert that the PMC, after only a few meetings, was ready to sweep away the Lewis machine.[122]

Within weeks of the launching of the rank-and-file campaign, however, the party quietly changed its objectives from reform of the international union to its abandonment and linkage with the MWUC. This abrupt change, which does not seem to have been accompanied by extensive discussion with rank-and-file miners, was forced on the CPC by the equally sudden CPUSA decision to abandon the Save-the-Union movement and form its own "red" National Miners' Union. The shift presented two problems for Gilbert and McLachlan: first, there was the need to retain the support of dissidents who may have been less inclined to go for complete separatism; secondly, by calling in effect for the formation of a new (although already-existing) union, they not only telescoped the timescale of the intervention but exposed participants to an irrefutable charge of "dualism." Some of the rank-and-file unionists who allowed their names to appear on PMC literature later claimed that they had no knowledge of the shift to dual unionism, and at the very least the party had not prepared the ground for this option. When the shift was announced, both DOSCO and the District Executive went on the offensive, the former promising to withhold recognition from the MWUC if the breakaway proved successful, the latter promising to expel every member who attended the "outlaw convention" which the PMC was proposing to hold in Sydney on 3 June.[123] By that date the PMC had collapsed. Not one UMWA local voted to send an official delegation to the convention, and while some 50 miners attended as individuals no discussion

[121] *Sydney Post*, 22, 23 August 1927; *One Big Union Bulletin*, 1 September 1927; *The Worker*, 3 September 1927; PAO, CPC Papers, 5B 0036, Campbell to Buller, 5 September 1927 for the Sacco-Vanzetti protest; *One Big Union Bulletin*, 31 May, 7 June 1928 for references to "seething ... discontent," including lightning wildcat strikes against longwall mining.

[122] "Borers About Face," *One Big Union Bulletin*, 31 May 1928; "Progressive Miners Open Campaign in Nova Scotia," *The Worker*, 2 June 1928; PAO, CPC Papers, 5B 0070, Buller to Joe Gilbert, 18 April 1928; 5B 0081, Gilbert to Buller, 5 June 1928.

[123] "UMW Takes Steps to Stamp Out 'Outlaw' Union," *Sydney Post*, 1 June 1928.

took place; following speeches by Reserve Local President Mickey F. McNeill, Gilbert, and McLachlan, the meeting dispersed.[124] Almost immediately, Gilbert was recalled to Toronto, leaving McLachlan to salvage what he could.

Had the party proceeded with more caution and candour, it might well have enjoyed greater success. A basis for activity among the rank and file did exist, as was shown at the official district convention held in Halifax in late June. Rank-and-file delegates showed strong opposition to all but the mildest disciplining of leading PMC dissidents; indeed, Glace Bay's Reserve local defiantly sent Mickey F. McNeil, the most prominent rank-and-file PMC supporter, as an official delegate. A defensive President McLeod pledged to back personally an appeal for clemency to John L. Lewis, provided that McNeil promised to renounce separatism.[125] Another indication of the strength of rank-and-file dissatisfaction was the geographical spread of locals providing members slated for punishment; miners from Glace Bay, Inverness, Thorburn, Stellarton and Springhill were represented. Yet another was McLeod's defeat by Dan Willie Morrison in the August district elections. The party, however, only succeeded in discrediting itself, though once again McLachlan escaped the general censure.[126]

During the latter part of 1928 and throughout 1929, the CPC was remade into "Tim Buck's Party." The man in whom McLachlan saw few "battling" qualities thus emerged to front a party openly preparing for class war.[127] As "left" and "right deviationists" (that is, followers of Trotsky and those, erroneously identified with Jack MacDonald, who questioned the viability of the "new line") were flushed out of the party, political leadership fell increasingly into the hands of YCL members who were totally committed to the new line. This was the case in Cape Breton where Murdock Clarke emerged as the party's new driving force. In 1929, while Clarke was attempting to reorganize the party on a bolshevized pit-group basis, J.B. McLachlan was conspicuously silent. He did not attend the crucial June 1929 national party convention (in fact, there was no official representative from District 1), and as he later reported, during that year "party leaders here said I was too old and out of date and should be out of the movement."[128] The indications are that he

[124]"Attempt to Form New Labor Union," *Sydney Post*, 4 June 1928. The *Post* could not resist a jibe at McLachlan: "Where once his audiences were numbered in the 000's, today he faced a meagre assemblage of forty-odd dissatisfied miners. [He] held forth with all his old vitriolic — if not eloquent — and crude command of diction. He has failed to gain in impressiveness from his enforced years of obscurity."

[125]*Sydney Post*, 19-25 June 1928. McNeill and another prominent militant, John W. Miller, claimed they were dissidents *not* separatists.

[126]PAO, CPC Papers, William Sidney to Buller, 25 June 1928 (5B 0085); Campbell to Buller, 20 August 1928 (5B 0088-90). In Campbell's letter came the sad announcement — particularly to Buller, the national organizer of *The Worker* — that he could not longer sell the paper at work.

[127]Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, ch. 6.

[128]PAO, CPC Papers, 1A 0049-51, Murdock Clarke to Tim Buck, 8 April, 19 June 1929; McLachlan's letter of resignation.

had reservations about the new line, but kept them to himself and continued to work with Clarke and the province's first-ever District Organizer, the Yorkshireman Jim Barker (Sam Langley), who arrived late in 1929.

During the final months of that year, the party's efforts suddenly began to bear fruit. Clarke's first pit groups had foundered during the previous summer, but with McLachlan's and Barker's assistance, he managed to get a sufficient number of groups going to announce the existence of the Miners' Left Wing Committee Movement (LWCM). Even more impressive, given the parlous state of the party's local and national finances, was the appearance of a new rank-and-file paper, the *Nova Scotia Miner*, as the mouthpiece of the new movement. Mindful of the PMC fiasco, the dissidents proceeded cautiously at first, believing that the Lewis machine was on the verge of spontaneous collapse from which the LWCM could expect to benefit. In November, however, coinciding with the launch of the new paper, they sought the authority of the CPC Political Committee to launch a more direct attack on the "District fakers." Barker wrote to the Political Committee claiming that McLachlan was the strongest advocate of this more aggressive tactic (which in the light of later events almost certainly misrepresented the case), but in any event the go-ahead was a formality, as the party had all but decided to complete the left turn by forming its own "revolutionary" trade union centre. An organizing coup in Cape Breton would provide an ideal context for launching the new organization, and the party duly sent the dissidents $100.[129]

Between December and February the *Nova Scotia Miner* hammered away at the failings of erstwhile-ally Dan Willie Morrison and the other "fakers." By the end of February the LWCM had been transformed into the Provisional Committee of the Mine Workers' Industrial Union of Nova Scotia (MWIU) and the new union's inaugural convention had been set for 15 March. As this date approached, the party estimated that "approximately 85% of the miners were in favour of abolishing the UMW." One, however, who favoured the new union wrote to the *Nova Scotia Miner* that "not too many" thought likewise. Left-wing organizers, he suggested, had to differentiate between those who would be willing to fight for a new organization and the "bunch of snowballs" who would do no more than grumble. He reminded them that the rank-and-file had not fought McLachlan's victimization in 1923, but had gone on "like a lot of old women [saying] 'Oh Buddy, Jim is red, and is preaching this red stuff, and we can't have him doing business because they won't listen to him; and by having him out of the union, I guess it will be better'." This "Banjo Swinger" (as he signed himself) then pulled himself into line with the party's official mood of revolutionary optimism and predicted that "we will understand some day, and that soon" the mistakes of the past and proceed towards the formation of "a new organization that will be led by those who have proved faithful to our class."[130] Murdock Clarke showed a similar disregard for contradic-

[129]PAO, CPC Papers, 8C 0208, CPC, Political Committee, Minutes, 16 November 1929.
[130]Both Clarke's claim and "Banjo Swinger's" letter appeared in *NSM*, 15 February 1930.

tory evidence when he accepted the charge that locally the left had "underestimated the radicalization of the miners of Nova Scotia and the influence and strength of the Communist Party and Left Wing."[131] For one thing, his Phalen local had been supporting him financially since his blacklisting by DOSCO in mid-1929, but when the LWCM moved into outright opposition to the UMWA, the local terminated its subsidy. Clarke's reports from meetings he attended at various UMWA locals also indicated that the rank-and-file remained badly divided.[132]

The Toronto leadership was determined that the split in Cape Breton should proceed. At this juncture it was pursuing its own agenda. In December it had finally created the Workers' Unity League (WUL), but had not communicated this fact to the public — or even publicly to its own members.[133] It was surely more than coincidental that the first mention of the new, revolutionary trade union centre in the national party press should appear in the 15 March edition of *The Worker*. If that day's MWIU convention were to prove successful, the WUL's launch would surely also be the more impressive. Tom Ewan, WUL National Secretary, underlined the importance of the Sydney convention by attending it and taking a full part in its proceedings.[134]

The convention was more impressive than its 1928 predecessor, but it was far from a triumph. Two Glace Bay locals, Phalen and 1B, sent official delegations, as did the Westville local of the MWUC (an unplanned offspring of the PMC intervention), but this still left 23 UMWA locals without official representation, calling into question the legitimacy of the planned breakaway. Moreover, while all the delegates favoured a split, they were not unanimously in favour of forming a red union. The Westville contingent demanded to know why the MWUC was no longer acceptable; they rejected the communist view that their union was no different from the UMWA. Other delegates expressed concern at the CPC's obvious domination of the convention, underlined by the decision to give Ewan "voice and vote," which they argued would certainly weaken the new union's general popularity. From the chair, J.B. McLachlan gave the clearest possible indication that he had reservations about party policy. He supported the split, but refused to ignore popular opinion and the signs that broad support for the new union was lacking. He reminded his younger comrades that "we are not here to build a Communist Party" and proceeded to refuse the convention's endorsement as MWIU

[131]Murdock Clarke, "A Review of Activities," *NSM*, 15 February 1930.

[132]*NSM*, 18 January, 1 February 1930.

[133]The WUL was first mentioned in the two left-wing miners' papers: *NSM*, 15 February 1930; *Western Miner* (Calgary), 20 February 1930. The CPUSA, in contrast, had launched its Trade Union Unity League with a founding convention in August-September 1929. The main reason for this contrast was that the CPC did not give up hope that it might be able (or allowed) to carry out the new line through the All-Canadian Congress of Labour until November 1929. See Tim Buck to "Dear Comrade," 22 October 1929, CPC Papers, 1A 0206.

[134]PAO, CPC Papers, 4A 2539-40, Provisional Executive Committee, Workers' Unity League, to Miners' Conference, Sub-District #1, UMWA, no date [c. February 1930].

President — with Clarke as Secretary-Treasurer! — on the grounds that he had only ever accepted union office when the rank-and-file voted him into it. Thus, while he could have left the convention once again a union leader, he was unwilling to lead a union devoid of genuine rank-and-file credentials and in danger of becoming the sort of "nice little sect" he had rejected in 1924. Instead, after the convention fulfilled the pre-ordained decision to launch the MWIU as a WUL union, McLachlan quietly distanced himself from party activity.[135]

At the height of the "third period," Communists were inclined to argue that willpower would triumph over adverse objective conditions provided the "iron bolshevik line" of the party was carried out correctly and with appropriate determination. Any worries about little local difficulties had to be set against the conclusions arrived at by "prominent Marxists in the Soviet Union" that globally the objective conditions favoured revolutionary initiatives.[136] Murdock Clarke, for one, believed that the MWIU had to succeed for this reason. In fact, its short, unhappy life provided early evidence that faith and will were rarely likely to be enough. The existence of the new union was proclaimed amid optimistic predictions that it would soon sweep away the degenerate UMWA "company" union. Instead, within three months, during which the MWIU failed to get "a single UMWA local to go over," the new union was dead and buried and the party once again in disarray.[137] Typically, when Jim Barker, who attracted particularly hostile treatment, wrote to Tim Buck asking for permission to quit the province, Buck turned him down with the argument that the combined attacks of press, pulpit, and UMWA reactionaries only demonstrated "the rapid sharpening of the struggle and the general crisis in Nova Scotia."[138] Barker knew otherwise. Shunned even by other party members, he left in July or August.[139] Murdock Clarke departed at the same time.

[135]PANS, UMWA District 26 Papers (microfilm), Minutes of District Convention Convened by Sub-District No.1, UMWA, Sydney, 15-16 March 1930; PAO, CPC Papers, 1A 0234-36, Acting General Secretary [Ewan] to Jim Barker, 13 June 1930. McLachlan took him name off the *NSM* masthead after its 31 May 1930 issue.

[136]Leslie Morris, "The Unemployment Crisis and Our Party," *The Worker*, 19 April 1930.

[137]PAO, CPC Papers, 10C 2139-41, "The Situation in Nova Scotia and Report of Left Wing Activities," no date [c. June 1930]; PANS, UMWA District 26 Papers, Mine Workers' Industrial Union of Nova Scotia, Provisional Constitution and By-Laws (March 1930); Jim Barker, "Miners Rally to the CLDL," *Canadian Labor Defender*, July-August 1930.

[138]Buck, quoted in William J. White, "Left Wing Politics and Community: A Study of Glace Bay, 1930-1940," (MA thesis, Dalhousie University, 1977), 97. This was the official line of the party leadership. Buck issued precisely this assessment of the party's situation after the round-up of the leadership in August 1931. See University of Toronto, Robert Kenny Collection, Tim Buck Correspondence, Buck to All CPC District and Language Fraction Bureaux, 19 August 1931.

[139]PAO, CPC Papers, 5B 0105-6, Barker to Annie Buller, not date. Barker was reassigned to work in the Lakehead, but was deported to his native England in 1932. See A.E. Smith, *All My Life: An Autobiography* (Toronto 1977) 109-10; John Halstead, Royden Harrison, John

Some Canadian historians have been deceived into thinking that during the "third period" Communists consistently pursued a sectarian policy that left the party isolated from potential allies and bereft of political success.[140] The reality was inevitably more complicated. Communists could and did learn from their mistakes, and at the local level often defied the worst excesses of sectarianism when these threatened to undermine particular struggles.[141] Cape Breton was a case in point. District 26 remained in party thinking "the most [decisive] section of the miners of Canada"; hence the party had to sustain a permanent presence there. If, however, it repeated its mistake of "jumping in and laying down a strict bolshevik rule, saying to the miners 'accept this or go back to the reformists'," one comrade noted, the result would again be "abject defeat." The way forward lay in showing sensitivity to the peculiarities and nuances of the local situation.[142] When the anti-Lewis movement revived, the party showed it had learned this lesson.

McLachlan's estrangement from the party lasted throughout most of 1930. Yet despite compounding his disloyalty by refusing to stand as a communist during the July federal election, he was still too influential a local leader to be cut adrift. The party considered sending him to the Soviet Union to "save" him for the struggle, but this proved unnecessary.[143] By the end of the year he had returned to party activity, no doubt feeling vindicated by the Party's internal "self-criticism" of the MWIU fiasco but also surely driven by the same forces that were bringing new militants into the party and encouraging expelled "old bolsheviks" to seek absolution. At the nadir of the Depression, it seemed that the party was the only organization offering resistance to wage-cuts and unemployment. "Class fighters" had little alternative if they wanted to make an impact.[144]

After a five-year hiatus, McLachlan set about revitalizing party associational life. This was more important than ever in the period of illegality that followed the arrest and ultimately the incarceration of the party leadership during 1931-32. Party work had to be conducted through the unemployed movement and various "front"

Stevenson, "The Reminiscences of Sid Elias," Society for the Study of Labour History," *Bulletin*, No. 38 (Spring 1978), 45. Clarke became one of a stream of Canadian cadres sent to the Lenin School. See Michael Earle, "The Coalminers and their 'Red' Union: The Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, 1932-1936," *L/LT*, 22 (Fall 1988), 114.

[140]Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, chs. 14, 15; Desmond Morton with Terry Copp, *Working People* (Ottawa 1980), 142-45, 150.

[141]Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 171-81, 212-14. This provides examples from the high point of the "class against class" period between 1930 and 1932.

[142]PAO, CPC Papers, 10C 2142, Thomas Rankin, "Tasks of the CPC and the Workers' Unity League in the Organization of the Canadian Miners' Union," 6 October 1930.

[143]*Ibid.*, 1A 0234-36, Acting General Secretary to Barker, 13 June 1930.

[144]See, for example, the letter of application from the veteran Industrial Workers of the World militant Sam Scarlett. University of Toronto, Robert Kenny Collection, Scarlett to CPC Central Executive Committee, 31 July 1931. See also Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries* (London 1978), 4.

groups like the Friends of the Soviet Union and later the League against War and Fascism. As was happening across the country, communists used "social methods" of work as a bridge to deeper political and trade union involvement. Educationals (the WEC was resurrected), talks, literature sales, dances, and socials all contributed to a modest re-building of the party; in mid-1935 District 1 claimed a membership of 110.[145]

In reconstructing the "red culture," McLachlan gave pride of place to the politics of Canadian-Soviet friendship. During the mid-1920s the CPC's links with the USSR probably brought diminishing political returns, but the coincidence of the Depression and the inaugural Five Year Plan saw the pendulum swing back in the party's favour: the ability to point towards a state where the workers' interests were seen to be paramount at a time when Canadian unemployment was soaring toward unprecedented levels had obvious advantages. Some Slavic miners were sufficiently impressed by reports from Soviet mining areas to leave Cape Breton in mid-1931. McLachlan encouraged and facilitated further migrations after his return from a trip to the USSR during the following winter. McLachlan exploited this visit to underline his argument that the simple choice facing Canadian workers was between continuing to support a system in inexorable degeneration or allying themselves with an alternative that promised equally inexorable progress. In reporting on social life in the workers' fatherland he did not conceal that there were consumer shortages, but insisted that these were irrelevant when set against the construction of a society free of human exploitation. His account of conditions in the Donbas mining region, however, showed higher regard for the party's propaganda needs than for strict fidelity to the truth.[146]

The central objective of all party activity in Cape Breton was the restoration of left-wing influence in the UMWA, in preparation for another attempt at splitting

[145]Earle, "The Coalminers and the 'Red' Union," 103-4; Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 558-60.

[146]PAO, CPC Papers, 2A 0850, McLachlan to Tim Buck, 7 June 1931; "More Miners Leave Glace Bay for USSR," *NSM*, 12 September 1931; "Record Crowd Packs Hall to Hear McLachlan at Florence," *NSM*, 13 February 1932. See also McLachlan's article in *Canadian Miner*, 10 February 1932. It is worth pointing out that many non-party prominents (G.B. Shaw, the Webbs, J.S. Woodsworth) who visited the USSR in the early 1930s accentuated the positive. Peter Hunter, another of Canada's Lenin School students, has noted in his "ex-communist" autobiography that he was genuinely impressed by the living and working conditions of the towns and settlements he visited. On the other hand, the Scottish Communist Harry McShane, who visited the Donbas at the same time as McLachlan, was horrified by what he saw, but thought nothing of lying about it when he returned to Britain. Peter Hunter, *Which Side Are You On, Boys: Canadian Life on the Left* (Toronto, 1988), 84-92; Harry McShane with Joan Smith, *No Mean Fighter* (London 1978), 183-4. McLachlan was, in fact, peddling a strict party line on this issue. See Communist Party of Canada, *The Triumph of Socialism in the Soviet Union*, Canadian Workers' Pamphlet No. 1 (Toronto 1930) 7-8, 11-2; Smith, *All My Life*, 80.

it. The UMWA's inability to combat the Depression presented fresh opportunities for agitation among the rank and file. If the late 1920s were years of stagnation or slow decline, the early 1930s saw a sharp fall in miners' living standards. With the total mining workforce holding virtually steady at around 13,000 between 1929 and 1932, there was no mass unemployment but pervasive underemployment; the average number of days worked per capita fell from 249.6 to 197.9, with miners earning between $400 and $600 a year. McLachlan, as editor of a revived *Nova Scotia Miner* (which had folded during the MWIU affair), hammered away at the district executive's responsibility for this situation. He claimed that the executive pursued class-peace policies motivated more by concern for its own bureaucratic interests than the material interests of ordinary miners. He picked out Dan Willie Morrison for special attention. Since the mid-1920s Morrison had become almost a model "labour statesman": Labour mayor of Glace Bay, president of District 26 and, most recently, one of Canada's delegates to the International Labour Organization in Geneva. In 1930 his total earnings from these posts stood at a healthy $5,644.10. "Verily," McLachlan observed, "the crisis has not reached him." And yet, Morrison dared preach the virtue of unity to miners who really were in crisis. McLachlan agreed that the broadest working-class unity was fundamental when miners were faced with sackings, short-time work, and deteriorating conditions. But unity without struggle was meaningless. Morrison's conception would leave the rank-and-file

> unitedly chained to prevent effective action,
> unitedly gagged to prevent effective protest,
> unitedly sold by labour fakers and Tories to
> increase the profits of the boss. United in
> poverty, united in docility, united in slavery,
> while the food is stolen from their children,
> and the clothes off their backs,
> to enrich idlers.

Real unity could only come by forming a real, fighting union.[147]

Although McLachlan continued to press for the rank and file to form a WUL union, he kept reminding the party of the pitfalls of forcing on Cape Bretoners a pure, revolutionary organization.[148] During 1931 the party, in another expression

[147]Province of Nova Scotia, Department of Public Works, *Annual Report on Mines*, 1929-1933; "The UMWA Lewis Racket in N.S.," *Workers' Unity*, 15 July 1931; "What History Says" and "The Unity of Cowards," editorials, *NSM*, 18 July 1931. For a graphic and detailed account of living conditions in the coal towns at the nadir of the Depression, see PANS, Provincial Secretary's Papers, Vol. 229, Proceedings of the Conference in Regard to the Unemployment Problems of the Municipality, City and Towns of the County of Cape Breton, Sydney, N.S., 20 July-1 August 1931.

[148]Norman Penner, *The Canadian Left: A Critical Analysis* (Scarborough, Ontario 1977), 135-6.

of independence from Comintern pressure, switched from attacking the MWUC as "social fascist" to rank-and-file oppositional work inside it. Within months it succeeded in adding it to the slowly-growing list of WUL affiliates.[149] McLachlan immediately called on District 26 to join the MWUC. In April 1932 he organized a tour of Nova Scotia mining centres by WUL National Secretary James Litterick and MWUC President James Sloan. Unlike Tom Ewan in 1930, they were tactful and responsive to local views and made no real attempt to press for formal affiliation to the WUL. Instead, they echoed McLachlan's contention that the Cape Bretoners' priority was the formation of a fighting union under rank-and-file control.[150] A split was now a foregone conclusion, and the independent AMW arrived at a special convention of the Glace Bay UMWA sub-district on 12 June.[151]

The party threw itself wholeheartedly into building the new union, which notwithstanding its continued independence from the WUL instantly became known as the "red" union. The new District Organizer, Bill Matheson, rendered invaluable assistance for which AMW Secretary Bob Stewart — a party member — thanked Jim Litterick, adding that he trusted "the friendly relations between our organization will continue and that in future we will be found fighting side by side in the common struggle."[152] In fact, this never happened. While the AMW proved more hospitable to party initiatives than the post-1925 UMWA, it never became the fighting union of McLachlan's fondest hopes.[153] Its "red" reputation stemmed from the fact that all District 26's militants flocked into it. But by no means all of its peak membership of 7800 (reached at the end of 1932) were sympathetic to the party's conception of class-struggle unionism. No sooner was the AMW founded than some of its members started a whispering campaign to underline that J.B. McLachlan had no official standing within it. The *Nova Scotia Miner* earmarked

[149]Seager, "A History of the Mine Workers' Union of Canada," ch. 3.

[150]*NSM*, 27 February, 5 March, 9 April 1932; *Workers' Unity*, June 1932.

[151]*NSM*, 18 June 1932; Earle, "The Coalminers and Their 'Red' Union," 118.

[152]Robert R. Stewart to James Litterick, reprinted in *The Worker*, 29 October 1932. Bill Matheson is yet another intriguing figure from Cape Breton. He was indeed highly conspicuous in the struggle to launch the AMW, promote the party and revive trade union organization among the steelworkers. By the end of the year, however, he had dropped out of sight, perhaps joining the Canadian Trotskyist movement. An article by Bill Matheson — surely the same man — displaying a detailed knowledge of party trade union tactics appeared in the Toronto Trotskyist paper *The Vanguard* ("Revolutionary Strategy in the Trade Unions: The Balance of 'Third Period' Sectarianism," November-December 1932). This commented on the "turn" away from "ultra-leftism" that was already under way, but which in his opinion lacked "a thorough analysis of the past sectarian course." He also refers to "our" party! There is at least one reference to a William Matheson as a local AMW official in the AMW records, PAO, UMWA District 26 Papers. For his activities in 1932, see *NSM*, 23 July, 6 August, 10 September 1932. See also Tom Ewan, "Send Xmas Cheer to Children," *The Worker*, 12 December 1934.

[153]Michael Earle acknowledges this, "Coalminers and Their 'Red' Union," 122-5.

the AMW's first Vice President, Clarie Gillis, former President of the UMWA Phalen local, as a Tory fifth-columnist, ever ready to strike a collaborationist deal and a key source of anticommunist opinion.[154] Gillis' views, however, carried substantial support, as was shown by the decision of the first AMW convention in September 1932 to outlaw "politics in the union."[155] Horrified by such decisions, McLachlan assigned himself the role of the AMW's militant conscience. As editor of the *Nova Scotia Miner* he again assailed the tendency to parochialism that, in his view, limited the growth of class-consciousness. As with the *Maritime Labor Herald* in the early 1920s, he exposed his readers to extensive coverage of national and international labour struggles, arguing that it would be "a screaming joke in the midst of a tragedy of unemployment, wage cuts and starvation" for the AMW to isolate itself from this broader fight. Similarly, when he detected evidence of class collaboration, he excoriated the perpetrators no less vigorously than he had the likes of Silby Barrett or Dan Willie Morrison.[156]

McLachlan made these criticisms despite knowing that the AMW's freedom of action was restricted by its failure to dislodge the UMWA. After the AMW's first flush of success it barely achieved parity with the international union, and with the latter making it known that its members would not honour AMW picket lines, the red union had every reason for circumspection. McLachlan was quicker than anyone to perceive that the split had left the prospects for a militant union further away than ever. He was the first to call for a suspension of "the partisan question" to enable a united front conference to take place, but his appeal was couched in terms of the "united front from below" which had no attraction at all for the UMWA leadership and probably came too soon after the original split to be considered seriously by the AMW executive. Its collapse was almost certainly guaranteed when another united front initiative intervened.[157]

In August 1933 McLachlan stood as the candidate of the Worker's United Front (WUF) for the Glace Bay seat in the provincial election. The WUF was the underground CPC in disguise; its three candidates — the others were John MacDonald in North Sydney-Sydney Mines and Joe Wallace in Halifax — were all prominent communists. McLachlan was expected to make the strongest showing, and so he did, but it was not anticipated that he would face a challenge from another workers' candidate. Nevertheless, some weeks after his nomination was lodged, the Glace Bay branch of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) chose to run his former ally Dawn Fraser against him. McLachlan always saw electoral campaigns primarily as opportunities to make revolutionary propaganda. He seized upon this one as an occasion to demonstrate his concurrence with the party's current analysis of the CCF's class-basis. Though he never used the term "social fascist,"

[154]"McLachlan and the Tories," *NSM*, 23 July 1932.
[155]"Politics in the Union," *NSM*, 1 October 1932.
[156]*NSM*, 10 September 1932, 1 April 1933.
[157]"Rank Indifference to Wage-Cuts," *NSM*, 4 March 1933.

he certainly saw the CCF as a "third party of capitalism." That the Glace Bay branch was effectively the political wing of the UMWA District Executive only strengthened this belief.[158]

McLachlan held this view of the CCF from its formation in 1932 until resigning from the CPC in 1936. Indeed, McLachlan's belief that the party was selling out to the CCF in an attempt to build the popular front was one of the reasons that drove him out of the party. McLachlan rejected the CCF's absolute commitment to parliamentarism and electoralism, not least because it rested on a view of the state as neutral and open to peaceful, socialist takeover. McLachlan believed that this view was designed to gull the working class, diverting it from the necessity of insurrection against a ruling class that would fight to "the last ditch" to preserve its domination. When J.S. Woodsworth and A.A. Heaps contrasted the "pacifist" CCF with the "violent" CPC, they objectively aligned themselves with the two openly-bourgeois parties against genuine working-class organizations. Woodsworth, the outstanding CCF leader and a man McLachlan had been proud to call "comrade," was now R.B. Bennett's "confident man."[159] McLachlan's hostility to the CCF was not simply an abstract matter. He also believed that the new party's political practice actively demonstrated its anti-proletarian character. He followed the CPC national line in presenting the suppression of the 1932 Alberta Hunger March as an object lesson in what workers could expect from any CCF administration. In fact, he was stretching the truth more than a little here, for the police actions against the March were actually ordered by the United Farmers of Alberta administration, which only affiliated to the CCF some weeks later.[160] He also saw the founding of

[158]The Workers' United Front (WUF) was originally formed in response to the WUL's "March [1933] Campaign," a drive to extend the revolutionary left's contacts with the masses by serious organizational work in industry and among the unemployed. Communists were its key organizers, but they succeeded in attracting a significant number of non-party unemployed groups to a Provincial Unemployed Conference in Halifax in March. Out of this came a detailed 11-point programme for united front work in the mines and unemployed movement, as well as a demand for the Bennett government to lift its trade embargo on the USSR: The Soviets, organizers claimed, were ready to award DOSCO a major steel contract which would be a boon to the province's beleaguered workers. The last point of the WUF programme was that parliamentary salaries would be handed to the united front committee, so evidently a decision had already been taken to run WUF candidates for the Provincial Assembly. See *NSM*, 11 February, 25 March, 13 May 1933. On the formation of the CCF, see "Labor Club Affiliation," *Glace Bay Gazette*, 20 February 1933; "The Careerists," *NSM*, 25 February 1933; Dawn Fraser to the editor, *Glace Bay Gazette*, 31 March 1933.

[159]"Mr. Woodsworth Gives a Sermon," *NSM*, 29 October 1932; report of CCF meeting addressed by E.J. Garland and Angus McInnis, *NSM*, 3 December 1932; "A Confidence Man and a Thug," *NSM*, 10 December 1932.

[160]"The Careerists," *NSM*, 25 February 1933. On the party's equation of the United Farmers of Alberta with the CCF, see George Pool "CCF 'Justice' to the Alberta Hunger March," *Canadian Labor Defender*, January-February 1933.

the Glace Bay CCF branch as nothing more than a blow against the local ILP branch, carried out by men who had "considerable practice in swindling the working class and [who could] belly-crawl to the boss better than most." He referred here to the dominant part played in the CCF launch by Glace Bay-based members of the UMWA district executive, notably Silby Barrett and Sandy McKay (joined shortly afterwards by Dan Willie Morrison).[161]

Lest it be assumed that the party held copyright on sectarian vilification, the Glace Bay CCF's response is worth mentioning. On behalf of the branch executive, Dawn Fraser wrote to the *Glace Bay Gazette* rebutting McLachlan's criticism of the circumstances in which the branch had been launched. Fraser homed in on McLachlan, claiming that the consequences for Cape Breton if the Scotsman's political vision ever prevailed would include drunken mayhem, the slaughter of innocent victims, and the defiling of "maidens and matrons."[162] It would appear that the CCF intended to establish its political identity by discrediting McLachlan and presenting itself as the sane alternative to his revolutionary politics. *Ad hominem* attacks formed much of the substance of Fraser's electoral campaign.

When the campaign commenced, Fraser's isolation from Cape Breton's other working-class candidates was immediately apparent. While McLachlan and MacDonald made common cause with Tom Ling, running for the ILP in New Waterford, and Dan McKay, who unofficially contested Sydney as a CCFer, Fraser was virtually a pariah, his campaign heavily reliant on open access to the letters column of the local press. And while McLachlan made nonsense of the "social fascism" analysis — to put it into practice he would have had to concentrate his attacks on Ling and McKay — Fraser subscribed to its mirror image, proclaiming that "the Bolshevists are our most deadly enemies." He broke with working-class custom by appealing directly to the working class Roman Catholic vote, perhaps believing McLachlan's support to be softest in this section of the class. He related how the Church had saved him in the 1920s when he found he could no longer stomach communist violence: the decisive moment came when he overheard McLachlan and Tom Bell compiling their list of candidates for the firing-squad. He also claimed that the CCF programme was based on Pius XI's encyclical *Quadrigessimo anno* and that another of its inspirations was the "distinguished Catholic teacher" Father Charles Coughlin, Detroit's Canadian-born "Radio Priest." As for his working class rival, McLachlan was "selfish, autocratic, vindictive and half-crazed over ... his beloved revolution"; he believed in the ballot-box only when he was a candidate and, contrary to popular belief, he had "stood the gaff" less than heroically when the going got tough in the 1920s.[163]

[161]McLachlan, "The Careerists."

[162]Dawn Fraser, letter to the editor, *Glace Bay Gazette*, 31 March 1933. A CCF branch meeting on 25 February had already announced that McLachlan was a "half-crazed individual, who has already done about all the harm he can ever do." *Glace Bay Gazette*, 27 February 1933.

[163]*Sydney Post-Record*, 1, 8, 9, 10, 11 August 1933. See also Fraser's earlier articles in the *Alberta Labor News*, 3 June, 24 June, 8 July, 15 July 1933.

When the election took place, the seat went as expected to the Tory candidate D.N. Cameron. In the separate contest for the working-class vote, however, Fraser was humiliated. Having predicted that he would out-poll McLachlan, he took 297 votes to McLachlan's 1737. He also handed McLachlan a perfect opportunity to argue that here was the real face of the CCF. More sophisticated spokesmen like Woodsworth, E.J. Garland or Angus McInnis would be "a little bashful" about unmasking themselves before the public's gaze. But Fraser — "a clown ... [who] never in all his life had the remotest connections with the labour movement" — lacked their capacity for dissembling. McLachlan also seized the chance to clarify what he meant by revolutionary politics. Contrary to Fraser's claims, he pointed out, his support for electoral politics had always been consistent: the ballot-box was a working-class weapon, to be used in conjunction with other, more direct weapons to promote working-class emancipation by electing genuine working-class candidates to office. Candidates like Ling and McKay, though they were not communists, were genuine workers' representatives. By contrast, candidates who could state, as Fraser had done, that "the bomb and not the ballot is [for McLachlan] the logical and effective weapon" were no more genuine than Jack Leopold (the RCMP plant who had been the state's star witness during the recent party trial). Fraser's eve-of-poll endorsement of Cameron as the best alternative to himself was final proof, McLachlan argued, that the CCF was a party of "political scavengers."[164] He was surely pleased that he had repelled its challenge.[165]

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CAPE BRETON between 1933 and 1935 presented an illuminating case study of the CPC's tortuous reversion to the united front and trade union unity; this final section outlines that development. The interruption to McLachlan's appeal for rank-and-file unity did not last long. If there had been no local forces pushing the miners together, the emerging international campaign would have provided propulsion.[166] During 1933-34 one important rank-and-file struggle demonstrated the possibilities of trade union unity in the mines. Between October 1933 and May 1934, AMW and UMWA members at DOSCO's Acadia Coal Company subsidiary at Stellarton struck in protest at a 20 per cent wage cut, defying management's threat to cease operations if the cut were not accepted. They finally settled on a 17.5 per cent reduction when it became clear that this threat was genuine. Had McLachlan's

[164]J.B. McLachlan, "The CCF in the 'Far East'," *The Worker*, 22 July 1933; "Woodsworth's Party Goes OPenly Tory," *NSM*, 26 August 1933.

[165]For the CPC's role in bringing the CCF back to Cape Breton, see Earle and Gamberg, "The United Mine Workers and the Coming to the CCF to Cape Breton," 97-100. For McLachlan's prolonged opposition to the CCF, see *Toward A Canadian People's Front*, 151, and "Ottawa Discusses Bloodshed," *NSM*, 28 February 1936.

[166]Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 328-35.

assessment of the irredeemably reactionary character of the UMWA leadership been correct, the district executive would have done little or nothing to assist the Acadia strikers. Instead, it took the controversial decision to impose a 25-cent weekly levy on each district member, which allowed Local 4811 to pay strike benefits to its embattled constituents, who accounted for some 60 per cent of the workforce. Although this was meagre, it was more than was available to the AMW minority, who had to rely on voluntary contributions (many of which came from the WUL and its affiliates) or on credit. By the end of the strike, some of the most prominent AMW members had applied to rejoin the international union.[167]

The Acadia strike seemed to suggest that the "united front from below" remained the most appropriate tactical approach. Although the UMWA may have grown stronger, the readiness of rank-and-file miners to strike together left room for optimism that the AMW might still achieve dominance. Already, however, the party was becoming more flexible in its approach to trade union structures, motivated in large part by a new desire to build working-class alliances. Between summer 1933 and spring 1934, the WUL had attained its peak development.[168] Its very success, however, also brought down upon it the wrath of the state, and there seemed every possibility that Ontario Attorney-General W.H. Price intended to renew his role as communism's leading scourge.[169] The Bennett government, too, openly solicited the support of noncommunist unions for an attack on the WUL.[170] In this situation, the party started to shed some of its sectarianism, aware that it needed allies. One example was its proposal for a National Miners' Federation, embracing the MWUC and the WUL's metal miners' and smelter workers' units and also the AMW and "our brothers in the UMWA."[171] The implications of this proposal, first outlined at the WUL's National Miners' Conference in July 1934, remained vague, but one clear result was that the AMW Executive approached the UMWA with unprecedented cordiality in the latter part of 1934. The UMWA responded in like manner and preliminary negotiations on reunification began in November.[172]

Still, the flavour of the united front "from below" could be detected in the AMW's negotiating stance. Its officers made two concrete suggestions: first, call for the creation of rank-and-file "Committees of Action" in every pit, with delegates

[167]Dalhousie University Archives, UMWA Local 4514 (Springhill) Papers, D.W. Morrison to Officers and Members of All Local Unions, 21 November 1933; Local 4514 UMWA, Minutes, 29 January, 11, 18 March 1934; UMWA District Executive Board, Minutes, 15 May 1934; Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia, UMWA District 26 Papers, R.R. Stewart, Financial Reports of the Secretary-Treasurer, AMW, November 1933-April 1934. See also Earle, "Coalminers and Their 'Red' Union," 123-6.

[168]Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," ch. 5.

[169]*Ibid.*, 300-2.

[170]*Ibid.*, 298-9.

[171]PANS, UMWA District 26 Papers, Minutes of Proceedings of the National Miners' Conference, Montreal, 30 June-1 July 1934.

[172]*NSM*, 22 December 19324, 5 January 1935; *Sydney Post-Record*, 21 January 1935.

from both unions; secondly, on the basis of input from these committees the provincial executives of the two unions would meet and construct a "Plan of Action" to provide a strategic basis for united front struggle in forthcoming contract negotiations with DOSCO. Neither suggestion proved acceptable to the international union and the meetings promptly ended. When the UMWA proceeded with independent contract negotiations, the AMW called a special convention in Glace Bay to clarify its position on unity. On this there was to be no equivocation. As union president John A. MacDonald insisted: "the road ahead for us [is] to build up the AMW ... into a union that will hold within itself 100% of the miners of this province."[173]

Throughout 1935, this was also the position taken by the party. Unity was important, but not at any cost. For McLachlan the issue could be summed up in another rhetorical question: "is the union fighting for the working class or [is it] just a dirty coal company's union doing its stuff betraying the interests of the working class?" He asked this after seeing the UMWA sanction a drive by Springhill's Local 4514 for an international union closed shop, the only occasion of any note when members of one union employed strike action and intimidation against members of the rival union.[174] In his capacity as National President of the WUL (he had held this position since 1933) McLachlan was at precisely this moment holding out the hand of reconciliation quite unconditionally to his TLC and ACCL counterparts, erstwhile "social fascists" Tom Moore and Aaron Mosher, directly emulating the RILU which had momentarily adopted a united front "from above" posture towards the social democratic International Federation of Trade Unions.[175] McLachlan may have been secretly relieved when the TLC and ACCL ignored his overture. He was certainly more sympathetic to a second RILU letter, issued when the IFTU was insufficiently effusive about its predecessor, which sustained the united front "from above" approach but identified three essential prerequisites for trade union unity: first, that negotiations between red and reformist unions should proceed on a basis of equality; second, that the resulting unified union should operate on the basis of "trade union democracy"; and third, that it should operate on the "BASIS OF CLASS STRUGGLE." Instructively, he published the full text of the second RILU letter in the *Nova Scotia Miner* in May, a tactic to which he resorted again in November when, at a particularly warm moment in the local debate on unity, he published one of the more unambiguously militant sections of George Dimitrov's celebrated keynote speech to the Seventh Comintern World Congress. This reiterated the classic Leninist position on the united front as an alliance within

[173]PANS, UMWA District 26 Papers, Report of the President [John A. MacDonald] to the Special Convention, AMW of NS, Glace Bay, 21 January 1935.

[174]"Dual Unions; Traitors' Unions; Workers' Unions," *NSM*, 23 February 1935; Earle, "Coalminers and Their 'Red' Union," 129.

[175]Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 330-32.

which communists had an absolute right to preserve an independent presence with the ability to educate, organize, mobilize and criticize.[176]

McLachlan carried this militant conception of the united front back into the miners' unity campaign. It gathered momentum during his campaign for the Cape Breton South seat in the October 1935 federal election. McLachlan informed the CPC Central Committee Plenum in November that the campaign had done "more for wiping out [the] split among the miners than any other effort during the last two years."[177] The core of the campaign lay in the formation of united front election committees in the pits, divided almost equally between members of the two unions. Not only did the experience of cooperation in a common cause pull a substantial cadre of enthusiastic young miners into the party, it also led to the reconstitution of the campaign's "delegate general committee" as a permanent rank-and-file unity committee that was continuing to meet. McLachlan was aware that the general thrust of the plenum (as it would be at the WUL National Convention that immediately followed it) was to direct the red unions back into the international fold, but while agreeing that "the basis for one union in Nova Scotia" already existed, he did not point out that he had already decided that unity would have to come through entry of the UMWA rank and file into the AMW "and by no other way."[178] Since as late as December CPC District Organizer Bill Findlay publicly supported this view, McLachlan, seeing party influence and membership again rising among the miners and steelworkers, must have looked forward to 1936 confident that the best days of Cape Breton Bolshevism lay in the future.[179]

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"IT IS VERY UNLIKELY," Ian Angus has suggested, "that any union in Canada, before or since, ever had as fine a leadership as that provided by the Workers' Party in Cape Breton in the early twenties."[180] This is a questionable judgment: in 1922 the party played little more than a supporting role; in 1923 its vanguardism pushed the steelworkers into a strike for which they were manifestly unprepared and handed John L. Lewis an opportunity to impose his personal control over the district union; in 1925 the party was split, its official policy expressed only in McLachlan's heckling from the sidelines. To assess the party's contribution we need to answer two main questions: what tactical choices were available in the prevailing circumstances; and at the end of the period of intense class struggle, were the influence of the party and the strength and unity of the class greater or smaller? Throughout this period the party had no choice but to take up BESCO's clear challenge to

[176]*NSM*, 18, 25 May, 2 November 1935.
[177]*Toward a Canadian People's Front*, 152.
[178]*NSM*, 2 November 1935.
[179]William Findlay, "Nova Scotia Workers in Fight for Unity," *The Worker*, 5 December 1935. "Elect the Communist Candidates," *The Steelworker*, 13 July 1935.
[180]Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 127.

established union standards, but McLachlan's policy of "ever-lasting attack" was inflexible and ultimately demoralizing. This was not the case at first, and paradoxically the party survived its 1923 adventure with enhanced authority; perhaps the miners' recognition that they could not rely on outside assistance helped promote among them a sense of superiority that meshed well with the party's local combativeness. By 1925, however, the situation had changed. Everyone involved knew that the strike was defensive; few entered it cheerfully. Yet once again the party called for a 100% strike" and appealed for workers' solidarity — and in particular solidarity strikes — that was unlikely to happen and for that very reason was likely to lead to rank-and-file cynicism. In addition, the party displayed hostility to the District 26 leadership in a way that undermined unity and dissipated its own already weakening grip on the union and the class. Could the party have done otherwise? It would be patronizing to argue 60-odd years afterward that it should have done this or not done that. But McLachlan himself pointed to an activity — unheroic and of a strictly long-term nature — that was more in tune with the defensive character of the struggle in the mid-1920s, but which if developed would have left the party in a stronger position to capitalize on a political upturn. As he later acknowledged, the local failure of the party to develop its members as cadres, with the intellectual and theoretical equipment to "state the position of the Communist Party ... intelligently," was mainly his.[181]

In fact, McLachlan's uncharacteristic self-criticism went too far. The articulation of defensive revolutionary tactics caused difficulties for revolutionaries everywhere in the international communist movement at this time.[182] Moreover, the CPC itself was notably late in this area and only started to correct its deficiency in the early 1930s.[183] Most important of all, of course, the real class struggle was there to be fought in Cape Breton: who could afford the luxury of the classroom? Nevertheless, the withering away of CPC membership in Glace Bay after 1925 would perhaps have been less complete had the party done more to consolidate the intellectual commitment and understanding of its members.[184]

Against these criticisms of McLachlan's local leadership must be set his greater realism in fighting to keep District 26 in the UMWA, where there seemed genuine prospects for Canadian and American "progressive" miners to overthrow the Lewis machine. Though McLachlan was clearly torn on this matter, his personal and political misfortunes in 1923 and 1925 make his hostility to Lewis's brand of

[181]See above, note 81.

[182]See Antonio Gramsci, "What the relations should be between the PCI and the Comintern," (1923) in Quintin Hoare, ed., *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926* (London 1978), 155.

[183]Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 256-7.

[184]Harry Campbell, one of the handful of die-hards who stuck with the party through its late 1920s tribulations, noted at the time that District 26 was "not as red as it was painted ... [There is] not enough Leninism here, we don't know enough about our own party." PAO, CPC Papers, Campbell to Annie Buller, 23 January 1927, 5B 0002.

bureaucratic unionism readily understandable. In the end he remembered his own advice to rank-and-file militants in 1920: "It took a lot of work to build up District 26, but the biggest fool in the district can tear it asunder in two weeks."[185] It is a tribute to McLachlan's tactical grasp that he set aside his reservations about the UMWA to protect the limited gains of collective bargaining and industrial legality.

McLachlan once remarked that the party contained "the only people" capable of offering intelligent leadership in "the rapidly approaching time when capitalism will have collapsed." On another occasion he argued that the rank-and-file would automatically follow those who "have [their] confidence ... any group of men will follow the man who makes the most intelligent suggestions."[186] This assertion of the party's vanguard role was sorely tried during the two anti-Lewis interventions in 1928 and 1930. On both occasions the party was operating almost entirely at the behest of the International's "new line" and displayed an urgency that did not allow those local forces favouring a split from the UMWA to mature. Quite possibly, its unsuccessful attempt to accelerate separatism helped dilute its ideological influence when the split finally occurred in 1932. Despite this, during the AMW's three most active years, the party began to recapture some of its early 1920s' vitality.

Labour historians are beginning to recognize that after 1932 the CPC muted its sectarianism and worked strenuously to undo the damage it had done to working-class unity in the previous three years (without, it must be said, any declaration of responsibility for that damage). Social democratic historians might reasonably object that the CPC's new orientation had a blind spot regarding relations with the CCF. J.B. McLachlan, however, would have seen no contradiction; he genuinely believed that the CCF was part of the class enemy. Apart from the CCF, McLachlan gave every encouragement to common action with non-party socialists. His rule of thumb was that the "men ... the worker should always trust is the man .. the boss persecutes."[187] He could not place the CCF in this category. Men like Tom Ling and Dan McKay, on the other hand, were class allies. In promoting unity, McLachlan and his comrades strove for the broadest participation of ordinary working men and women in the life of the red union, in the unemployed movement, and in other struggles. Bob Stewart claimed that the 1933 WUF programme was a brilliant expression of unity in action.[188] At the same time, Annie Whitfield and her comrades in the rank-and-file Joint Committee of Men and Women appealed to women to participate in struggle against the "untold agonies [they suffered] trying to keep the home together ... regardless of your men's organizational differences."[189] During the unity surge of winter 1934-35 AMW officials close to the party

[185]Quoted in Frank, "Contested Terrain," 120.
[186]*MLH*, 8 November 1924, 23 December 1922.
[187]"We Nominate," *NSM*, 27 May 1933.
[188]Bob Stewart, "MacLaughlin's [sic] Poll Is A Victory," *The Worker*, 2 September 1933.
[189]"Women Must Organize," *NSM*, 1 April 1933.

emphasized again and again the need for a "common front" and placed a responsibility on the red union's activists to "mix in a friendly, brotherly way with the men and women of the UMWA."[190] This drive for class unity involved no concessions either to capitalism or class collaboration, but by the end of 1935 it had helped restore the CPC's standing among the militant minority close to the level of the early 1920s.[191]

[190]"The Plan of Action," *NSM*, 5 January 1935; Joe Nearing and John A. MacDonald, quoted in PANS, UMWA District 26 Papers, Minutes of Special Convention of AMWNS, Glace Bay, 21-23 January 1935.

[191]I base this assessment on McLachlan's report to the CPC Central Committee Plenum. This does not give hard figures on local party membership, but it reports significant gains in recruitment over the period of the federal election and the subsequent re-launch of the miners' unity campaign. Since the party claimed a membership of 110 in July 1935, a figure of around 200 in December seems reasonable. See "Control Tasks Set by 8th Plenum," *Review*, July 1935 (copy in University of Toronto, Kenny Collection).

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